



# BLACK VANGUARD

*by*

EDWARD ATIYAH



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TO  
MY FRIENDS  
IN THE VANGUARD



## *Guide to the Pronunciation of the Arabic Names in this Novel*

- MAHMOUD** (Mah-moud) Stress second syllable  
 Mah— a the neutral vowel as in "above", followed by aspirated "h"  
 not as in English "Ah!"  
 moud—to rhyme with 'food'
- AMIN** (A-min) Stress second syllable  
 A— neutral vowel as in "above"  
 min—to rhyme with 'mean'
- AHMED** (Ah-med) Stress first syllable  
 Ah—a neutral vowel, followed by aspirated "h"—definitely not as in  
 English 'Ah!'  
 med—as 'mad' in madrigal
- SULEIMAN** (Su-lei-man) Stress third syllable  
 Su—as in "Suzanne"  
 lei—to rhyme with "lay"  
 man—long "a" as in English "man"
- BADRIYA** (Bad-ri-ya) Stress middle syllable  
 Bad—as in English "bad"  
 ri—as in "Rita"  
 ya—as in "yap"
- SHENDI** (Shen-di) Stress first syllable  
 "i" as in "Dick"
- SALEH** (Sal-leh) Stress first syllable  
 "a" as in "farm," "Sartre"
- AYYOUB** (Ay-youb) Stress second syllable  
 Ay—as in "Ayah"  
 youb—to rhyme with "cube"
- OSMAN** (Os-man) Stress second syllable  
 Os—as in "Ostrich"  
 man—as in English "man"
- ZEYD**—to rhyme with "laid"
- LEILA**—to rhyme with "sailer"
- AISHA** (Ai-sha) Stress first syllable  
 "ai" as "ay" in "ayah"
- KHADJA** (Kha-di-ja) Stress middle syllable  
 "i" as in "Rita"
- FATIMA** (Fa-ti-ma) Stress first syllable  
 Fa—"a" as in "farm"  
 ti—"i" as in "Tim"
- BABIKR** (Ba-bikr) Stress second syllable  
 Ba—as in "bad"  
 bikr—"i" as in "Dick"
- FADL-EL-MULA** (Fad-el-mu-la) Stress penultimate syllable  
 Fad—to rhyme with "muddle"  
 mula—to rhyme with "cooler"
- MUSTAPHA** (Mus-ta-pha) Stress second syllable  
 Mus—to rhyme with "Puss"  
 ta—as in the colloquial "thank you"
- MUKHTAR** (Mukh-tar) Stress second syllable  
 Mukh—"u" as the vowel sound in "book"  
 tar—to rhyme with "far"
- KHALDA** (Khal-da "a" the neutral vowel in both cases

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

"Yrs, but don't you think, sir, that philosophic integrity is impossible, absolutely impossible, in anyone who comes to philosophy as a believer in some religion or other? Look at Descartes, for instance. He starts with the most commendable rectitude, but what happens to his indubitably true proposition when he gets on to God?"

While Mahmoud was speaking with his usual zest, his tutor listened with only a divided mind. Mahmoud was one of his best pupils that year, and he always listened with pleasure to his challenging talk, but at that moment his interest was gripped not by what the young man was saying but by his existence as a human phenomenon—as an astonishing commentary on the shrinking of the world, the acceleration of history and the universal identity of mankind beneath the flimsy local crusts which grew upon it here and there, and could be so easily peeled off in a few short years.

With a whimsical smile more in his mind than in his vague blue eyes, Gilbert Wentworth looked marvellingly at the black, brilliant face that lay behind the flow of strictures on Descartes.

Mahmoud was an African and a Moslem. His country, now a British territory, had until sixty or seventy years before been a primitive land little known to the world except as an uncouth name suggesting slavery, ivory and the ostrich feathers in vogue at that time as a decoration for the Western female head. Mahmoud's grandfather had been a tribal sheikh, who lived and fought exactly as his ancestors had done for nearly a thousand years. Mahmoud himself was born in a home where not a word of English was spoken. He had only begun to learn English at the age of ten. Centuries of difference separated him at that age from the Western world; from Plato and Beethoven and Shakespeare; from 'commendable rectitude'! More of the smile that played about his mind crept into Wentworth's eyes to greet that delightful phrase, so typically Oxford and uttered in such pure English accents and with such conscious enjoyment of its flavour.

It never ceased to amaze Wentworth that five or six years at an English school in Africa and four years in England should have done all that. It also pleased him immensely. He liked to remember

that his own grandfather had held some command or other in Mahmoud's country in the early days of its association with Britain. He liked to imagine that the late Major-General Sir Frederick Wentworth, K.C.B., had one day met Mahmoud's grandfather, and to think of the immensities that must have divided their two worlds. It was across these immensities, as he was whimsically contemplating them, that 'commendable rectitude' had reached his ears. It gave him an exquisite thrill.

They went on talking philosophy for twenty minutes after the statutory end of the tutorial; then, as Mahmoud rose to go, Wentworth said:

"The President had a letter from your Director of Education yesterday, asking about your work. . . . I take it you are definitely going back to teach there?"

"Oh yes."

"Looking forward to it?"

"Very much."

"Well, I rely on you not to discredit me as a prophet. I told the President you would get a first."

Mahmoud felt happy as he walked back across the quad. That was the first time Wentworth had committed himself so definitely on his chances in Schools. Even if he didn't get a First, it was nice to know that his tutor thought he would. He didn't suppose it would make much difference to his career, but he very much wanted a first for other reasons. The English still ruled his country, and with a first his status among them would be unassailable. The British régime in the territory had been greatly liberalised: the old imperialism had, by the middle 'thirties, given way to tutelage; tutelage was evolving into partnership on the way to self-government. But the partnership was still uneasy, and nobody could pretend that all differences of status between Englishman and native had disappeared. A British official's prestige did not depend entirely on his quality or qualifications. His birth certificate was more important than a first-class degree. To draw level at least with that birth certificate, Mahmoud would have to have a first.

"Hallo, Mahmoud," said a voice close to him as he entered the lodge. He always walked with his tall, ascetic figure stooping and his eyes bent eagerly on the ground as though clearing a path for his swift feet, so that he seldom saw people unless they spoke to him. He looked round, and saw it was Michael Humphries, a college friend of his and President of the Musical Society.

"Coming to the recital this evening?" Humphries asked.

"Oh, damn," he said. "It's today, is it? I'm afraid I've bungled

it this time. I forgot it was to be on Thursday, and I've promised to go somewhere else."

"Pity. You'd have liked the programme . . . the Appassionata."

"Oh hell, just my luck, but I want to hear Crick at the Socialist Club."

"Popular-front mongering?"

"That sort of thing."

Mahmoud and Humphries agreed only on music.

"Well, I suppose you're right. Beethoven will always be with us, but not Crick, thank God!"

"What beats me," said Mahmoud, "is how anybody can belong to a party that died before he was born." And giving Humphries a grin of friendly mischief, he walked into the lodge to see if there was any mail for him. He found a letter which he thought might be from his father. From the handwriting on the envelope he could never be sure, because his father couldn't write English, and always got a friend to address the letters for him, and as the friend might be anybody who happened to drop in on Sheikh Ahmed just before or after he had written, or any Government official he went to see the following morning in one of the many offices he frequented either on business or for a social call and a cup of coffee, his envelopes came bearing an extraordinary variety of scripts.

He took the letter and went up to his room, to read it before Hall. He always ran up the stairs to his room two or three at a time, and never entered it without a thrill of pleasure. He had made it warm and cheerful, and as he himself admitted with a dash of bravado, a little challenging with colour—colour in the cushions and curtains, in ivory and ebony negro carvings from home, against emblazoned backgrounds of green and scarlet, respectively, in the Gauguins and Van Goghs on the wall.

His father's familiar handwriting in Arabic came out of the anonymously addressed envelope, covering a page and a half of note-paper:

OUR BELOVED SON,

After greetings and enquiries about your precious health, praying God that you are well and continue to prosper in all your affairs and particularly in your studies, we would inform you that we here, your mother and myself and all your relatives and friends are well and lacking for nothing, by the grace of God, except your presence, may we be granted that before long. . . .

Mahmoud smiled indulgently, affectionately. This preamble of

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prayer, and perfunctory information given and sought about health and general well-being was, with few variations, the beginning of every letter from his father. He continued to read:

Now, as you are well aware, it has always, since you and your cousin Badriya were little children, been understood and agreed both in our family and the family of your Uncle Yacoub, and with, I am sure, your consent, that at the appropriate time you would marry Badriya. To be sure, I remember opening the subject to you (or perhaps it was your mother) when you were here two summers ago after your first year at Oxford, and understanding that you had no objection to this idea. Of course, if things had pursued their normal course, there would have been no hurry, and the marriage could have waited till after you had finished your studies and returned home. But God has willed otherwise. It has, my son, and I am very grieved to have to inform you of this, pleased Him (who alone is to be thanked for what is detestable) to take your dear Uncle Yacoub to eternity, after a short illness during which the skill of physicians was of no avail. Knowing that his end was near, and having for many years desired to see you as his son-in-law before his death, your uncle—to whose prayers were added those of your mother and his wife, your aunt—besought me to conclude the marriage contract between you and Badriya at once; and I, remembering the assurance of your consent in the matter, which you had given me, and not doubting that you would wish to gratify your uncle's dying wish, agreed.

The ceremony was performed on Friday, the day before yesterday, being the seventh of the month. Badriya, as you know, is now over fourteen, and a well-developed girl; and she is very fond of you. May God bless this union (whose consummation we shall celebrate with great rejoicings on your final return home this summer) with prosperity and children.

A few days ago our papers reported your having made a speech at the Socialist Club in the university. This did not please me, my son. Socialism and Communism are alien to our religion and traditions. I am also worried about what the Government will think. Please do not go to that club again, and if you are a member, let me hear that you have resigned. I will then get the papers to mention it.

I leave you, my son, in the keeping of God.

Your loving father,

AHMED

P.S.—Write a suitable letter to your wife. It will be expected of you and will make her and her poor mother happy.

Mahmoud had opened the letter standing by the mantelpiece, and he had been just about to drop on to the arm of the big chair that stood beside him after getting through the preamble, when the meaning of the next paragraph, or rather a premonition of it racing ahead of the actual words, began to break upon him. He stood still, weakly, all power of movement, even the capacity to relax on to the arm of the chair drained out of him, and read on. With every word his weakness deepened—a cold, spreading paralysis, a sense of sinking, nausea. He read the last paragraph about the Socialist Club, which at any other time would have provoked him, without any feeling or interest, merely in order to reach the end of the letter as a matter of routine.

He remained standing for some time, holding the letter limply in his hand. Then he stirred sufficiently to feel that he wanted to sit down. Outside, college bells were ringing for Chapel. His gown lay crumpled on the table where he had dropped it, and beside it his essay book. He lowered himself into the chair, and with an effort read the letter again, taking it in sentence by sentence. What had struck him down as one single, annihilating thunderbolt on the first reading, now cut and stabbed him like a multiplicity of knives, every phrase hitting him with its own peculiar ugliness—‘the ceremony was performed’ . . . ‘over fourteen’ . . . ‘write a suitable letter to your wife’ . . . ‘the assurance of your consent in the matter’ . . . What consent was that? When had he given such consent? When he had mumbled something vague and evasive two years before to humour that foolish family idea for the time being, because it didn’t occur to him that it was anything which he need take seriously yet, when it was still years before he would be thinking of getting married? . . . Great God, what had they done? . . . Married behind his back, and to a kid of fourteen! . . . ‘Your wife’ . . .

He remembered his last sight of Badriya two years before, her stick-like legs, her silly giggles, and he choked with a sense of unutterable outrage. The meaning of the phrase ‘well-developed and fond of you’ made him sick. ‘Well-developed’ in their language meant that she was just old enough to be slept with in the strict biological sense . . . and they thought that was all he wanted, all that he could reasonably want in a wife; and his father could do that to him and then sit down and write to inform him about it, lightly, casually, ‘after greetings and enquiries about your precious



health', as though it were nothing more than the purchase of a new she-donkey! His father could do that in a letter designed to reach him in the midst of his Oxford surroundings—could throw at him a bit of raw mediæval life like that to hit him at the end of his third year at Oxford, in a brief interval between a philosophy tutorial with Wentworth and a meeting of the Socialist Club, which he was attending in preference to a Beethoven Sonata recital!

He winced sharply as he heard a noise. It was the opening of the door of Jim Powell's room. Jim was his neighbour on the staircase, a mathematical scholar and a close friend of his. He often looked in on his way to Hall to see if Mahmoud was there so that they might go in together. Mahmoud heard his quiet, light tread, and prayed fervently that Jim would pass on and leave him alone. He shrank from being seen by him at that moment, feeling unclean. He held his breath and waited. And then came the familiar light knock, followed immediately, almost before he could say 'Come in', by the slow exploratory opening of the door and the appearance of Jim's shy, sensitive face.

"Coming to Hall?" asked Jim.

"Is it time?"

Mahmoud crumpled the letter and pushed it into his pocket. He had nearly flung it into the fire when Jim walked in, but he couldn't bear his friend to see it, even curling and shrivelling up in its Arabic unintelligibility.

"Another few minutes," said Jim. Then he saw the ripped envelope on the small round table in front of the fire where Mahmoud had dropped it. "Oh, may I have those stamps? My little brother has started collecting."

"Of course."

"Good news from the harem?" Jim asked with one of his quaint teasing smiles. Their friendship was so complete and secure that teasing was possible and enjoyable between them. Mahmoud's harem was one of Jim's playful inventions, and 'you blacks' or 'natives like you' his favourite form of address when speaking to Mahmoud; Mahmoud called him Pythagoras.

But this time Mahmoud couldn't laugh. Afraid that his friend might be puzzled at the coldness which he was unable to conceal, he said, "It's from my father . . . my uncle has died."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Were you very fond of him?"

"He was a decent old chap; I liked him," said Mahmoud.

They walked down and joined the stream that was beginning to flow into Hall—black-gowned backs all flowing in, scouts bustling

in and out. They sat in the massive, gilt shadow of Past-Presidents on the panelled walls. The hum of conversation rose. At the high table the Fellows were beginning to assemble. Mahmoud saw Wentworth coming in, watched him sit down surveying the hall with his genial vagueness, and felt the same shrinking of his soul in shame as he had experienced at his first contact with Jim after reading that letter. The memory of his little speech on philosophic integrity pained him, and he turned his face away just as the knock of the gavel stilled the hum of talk, and he was on his feet listening to grace. Through the voice of the Bible Clerk intoning the unintelligible Latin words, the letter in his pocket silently shot its phrases like poisoned darts back into his mind—*your wife . . . over fourteen . . . the ceremony was performed . . . well-developed . . .* Benedictus Benedicat Per Jesum Christum Dominum Nostrum.

He looked up and down the rows of faces, and then at the high table, wondering what they would all think of him if they knew that he had just been married, without his knowledge, without any reference to his will, to a girl of fourteen! But he didn't have to wonder; he knew, and he felt like an impostor among these free individuals who were masters of their fate, whose personalities, whose wills, could never have such an indignity inflicted upon them. For the first time he felt inferior to them. He had never felt that before, in spite of his black skin and African origin. He had come to them as an equal, and many of them had accepted him as an equal, standing in the dignity of his intrinsic manhood. The backwardness of his country had never worried him. That was nothing to be ashamed of. The one or two instances of cold-shouldering he had experienced, the imperial or colour snobbery he had sensed in some of his fellow undergraduates, had never worried him. Those who were like that were not worth bothering about, and there were Jim and the others who were not at all like that. You did not feel ashamed if somebody was stupid enough to despise you because of the colour of your skin . . . but to be married behind your back was something different. It made you feel like a slave. The shame of the letter in his pocket burned through him as though it had been a stolen five-pound note.

"What's the matter, Mahmoud?" asked a friend from the other side of the table. "You're unusually quiet tonight. Is Africa down-hearted about anything?"

He looked up guiltily. "No," he said, attempting a light-hearted smile. "No. The white man's burden's all right."

"I think his soul is troubling him," said Michael Humphries on

the other side of Jim, "because he's deserting Beethoven tonight for the treasons, stratagems and spoils of the Socialist Club."

His enthusiasm for the meeting had been killed. It seemed to him that someone who, unbeknown to himself, could be disposed of in marriage to a girl of fourteen was no longer eligible for membership of the Socialist Club, any more than he was fit to study philosophy or sit for an Oxford degree; and if his father had not required him in the same letter to desist from that particular form of activity, he probably would not have gone to the meeting that night. But it was impossible for him not to disobey that injunction without feeling that he had surrendered his last claim to human dignity.

A few scattered groups remained chatting in the hall after the break-up of the meeting. Mahmoud and Jim were joined by two other friends from their college and a girl from St Hilda's who was a cousin of Jim's, and the five stood discussing a point in Crick's speech. Suddenly Mahmoud saw Amin, a jolly, friendly countryman of his who was an undergraduate at Merton, and turned his head away quickly so that Amin should not see him. But Amin saw Mahmoud's back, and saw also the faces of Jim and the other two men whom he knew well from frequent meetings in Mahmoud's room. He waved his hand, gave a beaming smile which none of them noticed, and bore down on them with his stocky figure that swayed slightly as though always straining at its wrappings.

"Hi, Mahmoud!" he called from just behind his quarry. "Congratulations!"

Mahmoud turned round slowly, like a sick man, feeling very faint. He knew immediately what had happened, what Amin meant, and what was going to follow in a second without his having the power to stop it. He saw it all in Amin's chubby, jovial face, in the gleam of his white teeth. He wanted to shut him up, to say something peremptory in Arabic which would arrest the words on his tongue. But he stood paralysed by the suddenness of the attack, awaiting his doom.

"Why didn't you tell us about it, you sly dog?"

"About what?" said Mahmoud, with the weak pretending of a thief who knows he is found out and about to be denounced in public.

"He's got married," said Amin cheerfully, addressing the company, "I've just seen it in a paper from home."

"Really, Mahmoud?"

"When did this happen?"

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"Who's the lucky girl?"

The questions came out simultaneously, with as much goodwill as surprised interest, from the little group of friends.

"Well, it isn't really a marriage at all," said Mahmoud lamely, trying to cover up his mortification with a show of casualness. "Not what would be called a marriage here. It's just a betrothal; she's my cousin." So it was in the local papers too, announced to the world even before he had heard about it! Amin had probably seen the notice before he himself had read his father's letter. The chords of emotion in him could not carry the full charge of this ignominy; they snapped. He received his friends' congratulations numbly, forcing himself to respond with a suitable pattern of smiles and phrases, pretending to treat the matter lightly from shyness, letting them infer, if they wanted to, that underneath his sophisticated flippancy, he was the traditional happiest man in the world. Now that the secret was out, the last thing he wanted was that they should know what he was feeling about it.

"I think this calls for a celebration," said Amin. "How about going to the Mitre for a drink? Can you all come?"

Mahmoud realised that Amin had not heard of his uncle's death; the paper that mentioned his marriage must have come out before his uncle died. Otherwise Amin would not have been so tactless. He himself felt too embarrassed to mention it now as an excuse for refusing to celebrate, and without that excuse it might look odious to refuse, particularly as Amin's suggestion met with instant and enthusiastic approval from the others, except Jim, who felt awkward and mystified.

So they took Mahmoud to the Mitre and drank to the bride, the bridegroom and their future happiness.

"Have you got a photo of her?" Jim's cousin asked him.

"No," said Mahmoud, "no, I haven't," thinking, 'God, what a bloody farce!'

## CHAPTER II

For the next two days Mahmoud kept himself to himself and did no work. All ambition and savour seemed to have leaked out of his life through a hole so large that nothing could stop it. He spent his time alone in his room or walking about aimlessly between

Carfax and Magdalen Bridge, along the Corn, through the wide expanse of the Broad—or he strayed into the parks and threw himself down on the dry warm grass. A heat-wave had come on suddenly, and the feel of the air was like that in his own country. Like a scent, the sensation of warmth on his skin brought to him images from home, ten years' old, with startling vividness.

One day, ten years before, the Director of Education was having tea with his father in the garden. They were sitting, the two of them, on the lawn in the corner between the jasmin bush and the canna-bed. Mahmoud, wearing his long white shirt, the dress of boys at his age—he was then thirteen and in the last year of the primary school—was in the house, looking out through the Moorish arches of the wide verandah at his father and his guest from time to time, awed and flattered by the presence of the great Englishman in their house. Not only was the Director of Education the big chief of the school world to which Mahmoud belonged as a school-boy, he was also one of the senior white rulers of the world to which Mahmoud and his father belonged as Africans, and it was a measure of his father's importance in the land that the Director should come to tea with them.

To his astonishment, Mahmoud heard his father calling him from the garden. He went out on to the verandah and stood hesitantly at the top of the stairs, not knowing what his father wanted him to do.

"Come down here a moment," Sheikh Ahmed called in Arabic from the lawn. "His Excellency the Director wants to speak to you."

Nervous but unutterably exalted, Mahmoud went down. The big burly Englishman smiled pleasantly as he presented himself.

"Well, Mahmoud," he said—with Sheikh Ahmed he had been speaking in Arabic, but Mahmoud he addressed in English—"how are you?"

"I am well, thank you, sir," said Mahmoud.

Sheikh Ahmed, looking from the Director to his son, followed the unintelligible dialogue proudly.

"Are you happy at school?"

"Yes, sir. I like it."

"That's good. Are you top of your class?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mabrouk." The Director used the Arabic word for 'Congratulations', and Sheikh Ahmed smiled happily. "What subjects do you like best?"

"Arabic and mathematics, sir."

The Director broke into Arabic again. "I am envious of your son, Ya Sheikh Ahmed," he said with the genial modesty of the great when dwelling on the refuted omens of failure in their early life. "He says he likes mathematics. I hated it when I was at school. All the bright boys like mathematics. I must have been stupid."

Sheikh Ahmed emitted a profusion of deprecatory words and smiles suitable to the occasion, the total implication of which was that whatever the Director's modesty might induce him to say in self-depreciation, Sheikh Ahmed knew for certain that he had been the cleverest boy in the school and a star of the first magnitude in mathematics.

"Are you good at games?" asked the Director.

"I like football."

"He seems to be doing very well," said the Director to Sheikh Ahmed. "I think they'd be pleased to have him at the English college. I'll write to them tomorrow."

The Director then left. Sheikh Ahmed came back briskly from the garden gate after seeing him off. In spite of his rather short, portly figure, he had a quick decisive step and walked with an air of importance, his shoulders thrown slightly back, his immaculately turbaned head held erect.

"Did you hear what the Director said?" he asked Mahmoud with a smile in which a veiled, mysterious satisfaction gleamed, indicating important achievement, great decisions.

"About the English college?"

"Yes. It's all settled; you're going there when you finish your primary school, and from there you'll go to a university in England, the university the Director went to. You can do that from this English college he was speaking of, but not yet from any school in our country. That's why I want you to go there instead of to our own secondary school, so that you'll have the best education in the world. Are you pleased?" He gave the boy a proud, affectionate pat on the nape of his neck.

"Of course I'm pleased," said Mahmoud, somewhat overwhelmed by the tremendous prospects, at once dark and dazzling, which his father was revealing—dark because he couldn't quite visualise them in all their meaning, dazzling because he knew that they were great beyond his comprehension.

"Let's go and tell your mother," said Sheikh Ahmed, who had a great loyal affection for his wife. In a land of polygamy, he had never wedded another woman, though he had married her when a very young man and she had only borne him Mahmoud after

many years of sterility. He might, he often did, satisfy the lusts of the flesh in secret ways, but Um Mahmoud, the mother of his only son, remained undisputed on her legitimate throne.

In a physical sense her throne was the large palm-matted, rug-covered bed with the carved and fluted legs on which she spent the greater part of the day, reclining on brightly embroidered cushions, sewing, knitting (a recently acquired pastime taught her by the local English lady doctor), drinking coffee, and entertaining with much good humour and laughter her many friends of the neighbourhood.

There, Sheikh Ahmed and Mahmoud, going from the garden into the harem, now found her. Her opulent figure sat squarely on the edge of the bed in a loose red-and-white cotton dress with a floral design of the sprawling variety she favoured. The thin white cotton shawl she wore on her head for decorum when there were visitors had slipped down on to her shoulders. Her face was a medium brown, a shade lighter than Mahmoud's, and large, but the features were dainty and the skin well greased over the years into a shiny smoothness. And round the face, the plaited hair hung down, straight and parallel, a semi-circular wall of shredded ribbon.

She put down some knitting when she saw them and gave a broad smile of humorous, plaintive impatience. "I'm not much good yet at this work of the Nazarenes," she said, laughing at her clumsiness. 'Nazarenes' was her name for the English, used in tolerant, almost affable deprecation.

Sheikh Ahmed took off his turban bodily, lifting it carefully with both hands so as to preserve its elaborate and manifold hollow structure, and sat down in only his skull-cap, in a large mahogany chair facing the bed. Mahmoud squatted on the floor near his mother.

She said, "Was the tea all right?" She didn't know much about sandwiches and cakes for English teas. That was all done by the servants. It was different when Sheikh Ahmed was giving a dinner-party to Arab friends, and an Oriental meal had to be prepared. But she liked to know that everything had gone well. He reassured her on that point and then said:

"We've got news for you—good news."

"Have they given you a decoration?" She could never resist teasing him when he looked so pleased with himself.

"Something better. I've done something good for Mahmoud's future. He will not stay here when he's finished with the primary school. The education in our country is still very inferior, and

I want him to have the best, the best in the world. God be praised. I'm well off and can pay for it, and he's going to have it. Isn't that good news?"

"Are you sending him away from us?"

"It will be hard for you and me, but it is for his good. He will go to an English school in the north, a very good school. I've heard a lot about it from my Syrian and Armenian friends. Their sons go to it, and from there they go to England, to the best universities, and become as well-educated as the English themselves."

"How many years will he be away?" she said quietly.

Sheikh Ahmed was nettled at her lack of response. Of course, women were different from men, and a mother's heart reacted before her head, but he wanted her to show some appreciation of his great scheme.

"Only seven or eight years," he said, "and he'll come home every year in the holidays."

"Please God, it may be for the best," she said. "You know what's good for him. But I should have thought the schools here and the college were good enough. Isn't Sheikh Ayyoub's son, Saleh, now a judge, getting fifty pounds a month, and Fatima's husband an inspector? Weren't they all taught here?"

She had learned in her shrewd way to be mistrustful of her husband's enthusiasms, many of which she had seen come to grief.

"Yes, but things are changing. The Government is already thinking of sending students to England to qualify for the highest posts, and other parents, too, will be sending their boys, so that they will have the best chance later. If Mahmoud goes now, he will be the first, and he will have the best chance of all; he'll come back equal to any Englishman." Warming with excitement and with the heat of the room, he removed his skull-cap, mopped his sweating baldness, and left it bare for the breeze from the electric fan to beat on it directly.

"He'll come back with the ways of the Nazarenes, and you won't like it," she said. "Do you want him to become an Ingiliz?"

Mahmoud looked up at his mother from the floor with stern repudiation.

"I shan't become an Englishman, Yamma," he said.

"Of course he won't," said Sheikh Ahmed. "What nonsense!" He got up and began to walk up and down the room. He had lost a great deal of his dignity by uncovering his small round head, bald as a glazed coffee-pot. In spite of his gorgeous flowing robes and the stately curve of his silk belt, he looked undressed



and insignificant without the episcopalian crown of his turban. "You don't become an Englishman by going to study in England. Did Gandhi become an Englishman? He's driving all the English out of India, wearing only a loin-cloth." He stood in the middle facing his wife. "You spoke of Sheikh Ayyoub's son and Fatima's husband. . . . Yes, they've got on all right for the times and considering their handicaps, but what are they? A junior inspector and a district judge. What are all the others of their generation? Junior engineers, junior judges, junior doctors, junior everything, assistants, deputy assistants—all subordinates. But I tell you the times are changing. Soon the highest posts will be open to our children. The Government has said that no post shall be filled by an Englishman if there is a native qualified to fill it. Mahmoud is a clever boy. All his teachers say he's first-class. Give him the best English education and there will be no position here to which he could not rise—Director, Governor . . . perhaps in time Minister!"

She knew once he got galloping on that horse nothing could stop him.

"Of course, you know everything, and I'm ignorant of these matters; but do you think the English will go so easily and leave all these jobs to our sons?"

"Not so easily perhaps, but gradually, yes; they'll have to, and that depends on us, on how quickly we can make them teach us better, or teach ourselves."

"Please God, things will be as you believe, but you know, people say that you like the English and trust them too much."

"I don't care what people say," he said. "I find the English reasonable, and I admire their character. Whatever differences we may have with them, they are a great people in their country, a great people—they have discipline, honesty, staunchness . . . and that's another reason why I want Mahmoud to be educated there. His character will benefit so much by it."

Um Mahmoud could not be serious for long on any subject. Some ludicrous point or possibility in it would leap into her mind and break the tension.

"God be with you, my son," she said, putting her hand on Mahmoud's shoulder so that the gold bracelets on her arm glittered and tinkled as they slid down to her wrist in a bunch; "but when you come back you won't want us to call your wife 'Her Excellency the Lady', will you?"

Sheikh Ahmed, who despite his self-importance was quick to respond to a joke, caught the spirit of his wife's pleasantry and

said: "No, by God, nor bawl to the servants across the lawn like the District Commissioner next door, or I'll cane you, you rogue." He laughed heartily, happily, pleased that his wife was no longer objecting.

### CHAPTER III

ON the third day, Mahmoud, coming back to his room for tea, met Jim on the stairs.

"Have you joined some underground movement?" said Pythagoras. "This is the first time I've seen you surface in two days?"

"I've been out a good deal," said Mahmoud, feeling all at once that at least with Jim the truth of what had happened would cease to be shameful if he told him about it.

"I suppose you natives just wallow in this weather. Have you been down on the towpath standing on one leg?"

"No," said Mahmoud, "I didn't have my spear with me. . . . Doing anything?"

"Just going up to have tea."

"Come and have it in my room."

Over tea Mahmoud said:

"I suppose the other night you thought I was weighing delight and dole in a very equal scale." It pleased him that the quotation had come to him so neatly. They had been to see *Hamlet* together a couple of weeks before.

"I was a bit puzzled," said Jim.

"Both events were reported to me in my father's letter," said Mahmoud, with an emphasis on 'reported'. And he went on to explain to Jim the circumstances of the marriage.

"You mean," said Jim, "you didn't know that this marriage was going to take place?"

"I didn't even know it was planned—in any serious sense. Marrying cousins is a sort of tradition in our country. I knew my people thought I might marry this girl in due course . . . but that was all I knew."

By confiding in Jim, by arraigning his people to him for what they had done, he was regaining his right to stand on the same side of the world as his English friend.

"Good Lord!" said Jim.

"And you know, my father has no idea that he's done

anything terrible. To him this is something unimportant."

"But, damn it, he can't give you the most advanced Western education and not expect you to feel differently about these things."

"Apparently he can."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know."

"Have you written to him?"

"No, I can't write to him. I can't accept what he's done, and it's so bloody difficult now to ask him to undo it, at least right away and in a letter from here. It would be such a terrible slap in the face to them, a mortal insult to my uncle's family. My father wouldn't be able to stand the shame of it."

"Do you particularly dislike the girl?"

"I don't dislike her, but I don't want to marry her. She's an uneducated child."

"Hasn't she been to school at all?"

"She has, to a primary school, and that'll be all her education. . . . Not that we have better educated girls in the country yet. That's why I wasn't thinking of marrying for years. I even thought I might never marry. . . . Actually, there are a few girls going to a secondary school now, so that things won't be quite so bad in a little while."

"But it wouldn't have been imperative for you to marry a countrywoman of yours, would it?"

"Not imperative, but almost unavoidable, if I wanted to live in my country."

Jim looked at Mahmoud with new eyes. He had always seen Mahmoud as an individual, a free individual like himself. Only now did he realise the immense difference between their positions. It was appalling to see him so wretchedly caught by the tyranny of his backward environment.

"But it's monstrous," he said; "there must be a way out of it for you. Let's think."

Mahmoud grinned with bitter humour, but happy in his new intimacy with Pythagoras.

"This is what natives like me still have to put up with," he said.

"But, damn it, you can't put up with it, you mustn't. Damn your family and its convenience."

"It's not the kind of thing you can say by return of mail."

"As long as you can say it eventually, it's all right. I suppose it's merely a question of waiting until you go back."

"Even then, it will mean a family earthquake and perhaps a complete break with my people."

It took Mahmoud another four days to think of a formula that would make it possible for him to write to his father without accepting his marriage or openly repudiating it. He wrote as follows:

MY DEAR FATHER | it was still customary among young men of his generation to address their fathers in written Arabic as 'My Lord, the esteemed father', or 'His Presence, my dear parent', but Mahmoud had cut out all this obsequious rhetoric in his last years at school and agreeably discovered that his father, far from minding, approved the more intimate formula |,

I was very grieved indeed to hear of Uncle Yacoub's death. Whenever I had thought of home and returning home, his genial, kindly figure was always about in the scene, warming it with that colour which was all his own. I cannot imagine that the town will ever be the same again without him trotting round it every afternoon on his white donkey, and I know that I shall miss him very much when I come back. I send through you my heartfelt condolences to my aunt and all my cousins.

With regard to the matter of Badriya, of which you told me in the same letter, we will talk about it when I come home this summer. The news you gave me was utterly unexpected, and I cannot conceal from you that I am finding it impossible to adjust myself to this situation at such distance from you and in the midst of my work on the last lap before my final examination; so please don't let's discuss it further till I have got that behind me and am back with you. My tutor has good hopes of my success, and the President of the college has written to the Director of Education in this sense.

I beg you, Father, not to worry yourself about the Socialist Club, and I ask you to forgive me if I am unable to conform with your wishes in this matter.

He felt under great restraint while he was writing, but when he finished the letter and read it through, a screaming anger blew through him, tearing up and scattering every root of affection he felt for his people, every allowance he had made for them. The wrong they had done him faced him in appalling nudity, inexcusable, and for an instant he felt nothing but hatred for every one of them—his father and his mother and his dead uncle. He

wanted to tear up the letter, take back the sentimental paragraph about his uncle and his white donkey, and let this untamed anger flow out instead. But suddenly it slumped, and a strange pity filled him: pity for their stupidity, for their unawareness of what they had done, for the distance which separated him from them—a nostalgic compassion for something he had left behind and could never go back to in his heart.

## CHAPTER IV

THEY sat on his raincoat spread out on the grass under a clump of trees: she fair, pretty, with eyes of green flame in an honest, passionate face; he, a chocolate brown, serious-looking in a worried, temporary way not natural to his face. He held her hand so that the chocolate of his looked an ebony black against her arm. Some horses browsed at a little distance, motionless except for the occasional swish of their tails.

"But I shouldn't mind living in your country. I'd go there with you."

Amin looked into the distance, at the horses' tails. "No," he said, "it wouldn't do; you're very brave, but it wouldn't do. Everything would be against it."

"Your people? . . . I'd be nice to them. I'd make them like me. Why don't you let me try?" She spoke with a missionary earnestness.

"It's no good. I know what things are like there, and you don't. Even if nobody was against it, it just wouldn't fit in, don't you see, and we shouldn't be happy. It isn't so much a question of *people* being against it, as of *things*, and you can't change things—not very quickly."

He lifted her hand and kissed it.

"But sooner or later somebody's got to make a beginning. Why shouldn't we be the first? It would be very exciting."

The temporary solemnity left his smooth round face, and he grinned. "Guinea-pigs don't usually volunteer for experiments," he said. "Particularly if they know what the laboratory is like. Now, I grew up in this particular lab. and you've never seen it, and I tell you it's not very healthy. . . . No, *chérie*, the only place for us is Paris—that is, if your interest in me is really one of personal devotion, and not merely a left-wing gesture."

He fixed on her a side look of pretended scepticism. Seeing her

rise as usual to this bait, he went on, "But it, on the contrary, your chief object is to administer a blow to reactionary conventions relating to the pigment of the human epidermis, then of course my country . . ."

The green fire in her eyes was flaring up at his teasing, and before he had finished speaking she swung out her right hand and brought it back with the necessary momentum for a slap on his cheek. He ducked, chuckling, got on to his feet and ran. She jumped up and ran after him, shouting, "I'll teach you, you devil!"

"Mind the cow-dung," he shouted, laughing. Then he slowed down and let her catch him. She boxed his ears. He giggled helplessly and his laughter infected her. They tumbled down, laughing together.

This jibe of his always provoked her because there was some truth in it. The shaft pierced that secret place in her mind where she never ceased to be slightly conscious of enjoying her daring in deciding to marry a 'black' man. To her, the colour of his skin had long ceased to be anything alien, anything different from normal characteristics, like shortness or tallness or the colour of one's eyes. She loved him as he was and could not imagine or wish him different from what he was—gay, warm-hearted, mad about his painting and absurdly fond of Paris, sometimes a little irresponsible like a child, a little stocky, chocolate-brown. She was going to marry him because he attracted her and she was happy with him, but it gave her an ideological kick all the same. Love apart, there was a thrill in defying bourgeois conventions, in proving startlingly that one's socialism did not falter before any practical personal test, in giving a shock to Uncle Leopold and his wife! Her father, she thought, she could bring round. He had met Amin and taken to him, and his fondness for her, particularly since her mother died, had been of the indulgent kind that could swallow almost any eccentricity. But Uncle Leopold! . . .

Uncle Leopold had been at one time on the Viceroy's staff, when the Viceroy was Lord Curzon. She imagined that all the British officials in Amin's country were Uncle Leopolds, more or less; and if only Amin would agree to their living there, how she would enjoy flaunting herself before them, the first Englishwoman in the country to be married to a native. Paris would not be nearly so exciting. Paris was wrong; it was running away from things. She was angry with Amin because he did not feel that their marriage was a mission. To him it was just a personal affair. And of course it was that to her in the first place, but it was also more than that—

a part of the historical process, a blow in the struggle for one world and human brotherhood. When she said that to him, he said that the struggle was going on everywhere and that they could play their part in it in Paris as well as anywhere else. "*Aux barricades!*" he said. But she felt differently. She felt that for them his country was the firing-line and Paris a comfortable place somewhere in the rear.

Mahmoud had often seen Amin with Betty Corfield. He knew she was a Somerville girl with a great reputation for militancy in the Socialist Club, but he did not know what Amin's relations with her were. He himself had not had any love affairs in England, had set his face against any thought of English girls, or indeed any white girls in that connection, not only because he could not see himself marrying a Western woman if he wanted to go back and live in his country, but also because of a secret shy fear that he might be rebuffed on account of his colour—an acute sensitiveness of pride that inhibited him completely, despite his knowledge that quite a number of dark-skinned students at Oxford and elsewhere had found English girls to whom their colour was not unacceptable in love, even in marriage, and that in the political fervour of the time many left-wing English girls made a point of going about with coloured co-religionists.

There was something else that inhibited him too—the attitude of some of the African and Asiatic students he knew; the mentality of young men who, in their own countries, because of the segregation of the sexes, only made love to prostitutes before marriage, and now found it possible to do that to decent girls. It was not natural to them. They did it with the freedom of the body alone, not the mind. In their hearts they despised the girls who slept with them, because in their minds a girl who slept with a man not her husband was still a prostitute or a concubine. . . . And sometimes it was worse than that; it was as if a servant had suddenly discovered that he could have his master's daughter. That made Mahmoud absolutely sick—to glory in having a white woman, an Englishwoman, because you still felt that she belonged to a superior race, because her kinsmen were still bossing you in your country. Amin, he knew, was not that type, was neither servile nor cynical; but he was getting too attached to that girl, Mahmoud thought, wondering what it was going to lead to.

He had his answer one evening when Amin dropped in after Hall, bringing with him a newspaper that had reached him that morning from home.

"Seen this?" he asked. Amin was always producing bits of news from home and coming with them to Mahmoud—items from letters, press-cuttings sent by friends, whole newspapers.

Mahmoud looked at the headline. It announced: "Government decides to set up Legislative Assembly."

"At last!" he said.

"You won't be so pleased when you read the rest. Half the members are to be tribal chiefs, and there are to be ten seats as well for Government nominees. That means a clear Government majority from the word go: sixty yes-men out of a hundred, fifty of whom will say, 'Yes, Your Excellency', and ten 'Yes, Sir'. . . . Eyewash!"

"Even that's better than nothing. You can do a lot with an opposition of forty. . . . Let me see."

He took the paper and read the details.

"Would you serve on an Assembly like that?" asked Amin.

"I might."

"I wouldn't. I wouldn't want to participate in a fraud."

"Even a fraud is better than robbery with violence. The one doesn't recognise that you have any rights at all. The other at least pays them an oblique homage."

They argued for a while, Mahmoud maintaining that it was more fruitful to co-operate with the Government in half-measures, which might grow, than to get bogged in negative opposition, holding out for the whole at once. As always, when the argument got heated they broke into Arabic and their voices rose to the higher pitch customary in that medium and inevitably suggesting to English ears the imminence of physical violence. Jim Powell, passing in the passage and hearing the shouting, opened Mahmoud's door and put his head in for a moment, saying: "Just the usual friendly argument, I trust."

They laughed sheepishly, remembering his many leg-pulls about the arguing habits of the blacks disturbing his academic peace, leg-pulls which always pricked Mahmoud into a slight feeling of embarrassment. He wished he could keep his voice under control when arguing, that Arabic, as he and Amin spoke it, did not always sound like an unseemly brawl. He had often tried to modify this characteristic which boomed its alienness in England so blatantly; but he just could not, except in the all-too-brief moments of conscious effort.

"Come in," said Mahmoud.

"I've got some work to do . . . if you will let me."

He smiled in his good-humoured, teasing way and went on to



his room. Mahmoud and Amin resumed their argument and at last Mahmoud said:

"Well, we shall see when we get back."

There was a short silence, then Amin said: "I am not going back, Mahmoud."

"What do you mean, not going back?"

"I'm marrying Betty Corfield and we are going to live in Paris."

"Oh!"

"I can't take her home. That's out of the question. And it wouldn't be much better here. Don't you think Paris is a good idea? A man I know there on the Arabic Broadcasting Service has offered me a job, and I can carry on with my painting."

"But isn't that rather tough on your people?"

"My people have five other sons, but I have only one life and I want to live it the way I choose. It's different for you, because you have a sense of mission. You want to go back and work for our people. When you're like that you can put up with anything. But I am not like that, and it's no use pretending I am. . . . My father won't break his heart over it."

"Have you told him?"

"No, and please don't say anything about it when you write home. I don't want any trouble before the end of the year. I'll tell him when the time comes."

"She's a very nice girl, from what I've seen of her," said Mahmoud. "Good luck to you."

"She's so nice that she doesn't agree with me about Paris. She'd rather take me back home, and face any music that may greet her. But I don't think it would work out well that way, do you? If you were marrying an English girl, would you risk it?"

"I've never had to consider the problem. I dare say you're right."

"You don't approve of what I'm doing?"

"Why should I not approve? This is a very personal matter and nobody has the right to tell you what to do." A slightly bitter, defiant note had come into Mahmoud's voice; he spoke as though defying his own principles, the principles which had betrayed him—held him down so that he could be stabbed in the back.

And when Amin had gone, Mahmoud thought, "God, how simply he has solved his problem! Just to say, 'I am not going back. I am marrying Betty Corfield and we are going to live in Paris!'" Ten days ago he would have found this announcement shocking, a callous, selfish walking-out on family and country. Their country was so backward, so desperately in need of educated men; and they, the first-fruits of British university education, were

awaited back with so much eagerness that it would have seemed to him almost an act of treachery to default on that obligation, like desertion in face of the enemy, when the enemy was the ignorance of their people and they the relief troops on the way. But now, and while he still was left a little breathless by Amin's irresponsibility, he envied him, envied him this very irresponsibility, envied him both the ease with which he was taking his freedom and the wife of his choosing he was going to marry.

He envied him still more the following morning when he received another letter from his father, which apparently had crossed his reply to the previous one.

OUR BELOVED SON (wrote Sheikh Ahmed),

This is going to bring you a great surprise. Certain business transactions make it necessary for me to come to England in person, a development which I heartily welcome since it will give me the opportunity of visiting a country I so much admire and have always longed to see; and the occasion is all the more fortunate in that you will still be in England when I come.

But this is not all. Seeing that this occasion has arisen after your marriage, and that a visit to England will do your wife a great deal of good in that it will introduce her to English ways, broaden her mind, improve her English, and so help to make her a suitable companion for you, I have arranged to bring her with me. Our friend, Miss Bannerman, the headmistress of the girls' primary school, who will be free for the summer holidays, has agreed to come with us as a companion to Badriya. It is my intention to remain in England for two or three months, and you will of course join us when your examinations are over. Please therefore reserve for us accommodation at a suitable hotel in London. I am told a hotel called the Savoy is a good place to stay at.

Your mother is well and lacks for nothing except your dear presence, which will now, God willing, be shortly vouchsafed her, and still more shortly, I am happy to think, vouchsafed to

Your loving father,

AHMED

P.S.—Make sure the rooms you reserve are the best available in the hotel, and if this place, the Savoy, doesn't seem to you good enough, use your discretion.

During the next two days Mahmoud drafted several cables to his father which tried to express, by various arrangements of the

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During the next two days Mahmoud drafted several cables to his father which tried to express, by various arrangements of the

same words, his frantic opposition to Badriya's coming. But none satisfied him, none seemed to meet the case. There was no arrangement of those words which would make sense to his father in a cable. Only a blunt announcement of his rejection of the wretched girl as a wife could do that, and that it was impossible for him to do in a cable or even in a letter. A sense of helplessness and doom came over him. A feeling that it was futile to struggle against a fate so determined and so swift in its operations, at least futile to struggle against its outward motions. Let them come. Let things take their course.

He even began to resign himself to the marriage. When the shock of its announcement, when his anger at its having been done behind his back, began to wear off, he asked himself whether in itself and apart from the way it had been sprung on him, it was as intolerable as he had at first felt it to be. It did not seem so. He could scarcely hope for a really satisfactory marriage in his country, the kind of marriage he would want. Badriya would probably be no worse than any other wife he could find. She was still a child, and need not become his wife in fact for several years. In that time he could get her to continue her education privately; he would supervise it himself. Miss Bannerman could go on giving her lessons. Meanwhile he would regard the marriage as an engagement.

## CHAPTER V

SHEIKH AHMED looked out at England from the splendid comfort of his Pullman seat. He felt splendid himself, and looked very impressive in his native costume—colourful, superbly exotic and yet perfectly at home. He looked at the rolling sea of green, at the endless archipelagos of trees, at the sheep browsing—fat, curl-coated, with posteriors he had never seen on sheep before, for the scraggy sheep in his country wore long, narrow, almost flat tails.

This, then, was the amazing little island in the north whose sons went out to rule half the globe. How could they leave such a land and bury themselves in African deserts, young men of the best families from Oxford and Cambridge—bury themselves for years at lonely outposts blistered by the sun and lashed by sandstorms . . . and never for years go near a woman! That was a fact; he knew it of many of them, at the throbbing time of life. What self-control! No wonder they ruled half the world. Sheikh Ahmed, being himself somewhat deficient in that particular qualification

for world dominion, never ceased to regard it with reverence in others.

Indeed, from the moment he had stepped ashore at Dover he had been regarding everything he saw with reverence, saying to himself, 'A great people, a great people in their country.' The French, he was convinced, were not a great people. French administrative officers at lonely out-stations in Africa, across the border from his country, did not show that self-control which gave the British the empire of the world. It was not for nothing the British had turned them out of Canada and India. From Marseilles to Calais, through Paris, he had refused to be impressed. Greatness began only at Dover. Miss Bannerman had suggested that they might break the journey in Paris for a day or two, but Sheikh Ahmed had heard a lot about Paris and was convinced that it would not be proper for him, accompanied by his daughter-in-law and a young Englishwoman, to stay in that city. . . . Perhaps if he had been on his own, or with a suitable guide who knew the place . . . but certainly not with two virgins, one of whom was now married to his son. He had been slightly shocked that Miss Bannerman should have made the suggestion, but then concluded that she was too innocent to know better.

Badriya sat opposite him and Miss Bannerman next to her. Unlike Sheikh Ahmed, whose only European article of clothing was a scarf wrapped round his neck to make good the absence of collars in his native costume, Badriya retained of her traditional dress only the white muslin head-cover—a half-scarf, half-shawl affair which she wore like a Balaclava helmet mainly for decorum. For the rest she was dressed in a completely European outfit bought for her in Cairo with the help of Miss Bannerman. They had gone to the most expensive shops, and in every department Sheikh Ahmed had majestically ordered 'the best you have' to be brought forth, deferring to Miss Bannerman—though often against his own preferences—in regard to style and colour, but repeatedly opposing and defeating her well-meant efforts to prevent extravagance. His agricultural schemes had been very successful that year, his bank balance was massive, and there was nothing to prevent him from having the best of everything.

Badriya looked considerably older than her fourteen years. She was tall, as tall as Miss Bannerman who had an average Englishwoman's figure, and her bosom was fully developed. She had an aristocratic, almost effete elegance of body and limb, not uncommon in girls of her race—a languid elongation, as though artificially produced by a long process of selective breeding. Her skin

stretched over her like a rubber glove, smooth and filmy. Her fingers were long, slender and tapering with a slightly upward tilt; and her face was a fine piece of carving, oval, delicate, beautiful with the beauty of wood. The eyes had an unnatural cold depth, an imperviousness to animation as though they had seen everything and long ceased to wonder. She sat statically elegant in her light beige coat and white muslin Balaclava, accepting England as a matter of course. She had accepted the whole journey as a matter of course—the big shops in Cairo, her first sight of the sea at Alexandria, the five days on the ship, and now England . . . a succession of hoardings on which the words 'Carter' and 'Pills' and 'Liver' and 'Little' were endlessly repeated. She had counted five of them, and by now made out the sentence. At the sixth, she turned to Miss Bannerman.

"What is that?" she asked. "Why is it everywhere?"

Miss Bannerman explained. She was glad when the girl asked a question. Most of the time she had to talk and explain things to her unsolicited, trying to arouse her interest and feeling defeated by her coldness. She had a number of pupils in her school whose lively, intelligent interest in such a trip she could well imagine and whom it would have been a pleasure to bring to England for the first time. . . . If only Badriya were like her father-in-law! It was he who reacted like a bright and happy child. Miss Bannerman enjoyed watching the wonder in his eyes, his quick responses to every new impression, his alertness, his enjoyment. She enjoyed hearing his comments, which he framed in simple, broken Arabic for her benefit, broken Arabic interspersed with 'good' and 'very nice'. In France many things had been 'not very good'—the manners of the porters, the service on the train. But even there he was taking everything in, appraising, savouring.

Suddenly he surprised her with a new English word. After gazing out of the window for a long moment, he turned to her and said: "England bootiful!" Then he added gallantly in Arabic, for he had reached the limits of his English along that particular line of thought, "Like her daughters"; and he flashed his white teeth at her in a merry smile.

"No . . . no!" she said, laughing. "Much more than this daughter here, but thank you, all the same."

Jean Bannerman was not beautiful. Compared to Badriya's carved face, hers was almost plain; almost, at twenty-six, school-marmish; almost, but—as she often encouraged herself, looking in the mirror—not quite. It had a quiet, feminine charm in its strength. Her complexion after two years in Africa had paled,

and the blue of her eyes was a pale water-colour blue. She did not make up at all, and her hair, parted in the middle, was drawn back simply over the temples into a knob at the back. But the general effect was subtly appealing, simple, not severe.

Mahmoud stood on the platform at Victoria Station, feeling sick. Meeting the girl of fourteen who was now his wife was quite another matter from being resigned to the idea of his marriage in the abstract. He would have to speak to his father at once and define his attitude, or he would find himself in a false and impossible position from the start. But he did not feel quite sure now what his attitude was. His anger, his sense of revolt, was returning. He paced up and down the platform, his hands wet with cold perspiration. Why did this have to happen a week before his Finals? How could . . . his thought was snapped by the sight of the engine crawling in, and a few moments later he saw them—his father bustling briskly through the crowd with a happy smile on his face, and behind him Miss Bannerman and Badriya.

At the sight of his father, of the joy in his childlike smile, a warm current flowed from a hundred forgotten springs in Mahmoud's heart, and for the moment drowned his anger. He was touched, not embarrassed, by the warmth of his father's uninhibited embrace in that English crowd.

"How are you, Mahmoud, how is it with you, my son? God be praised, I see you well."

"God be praised on your safe arrival."

"Here's Badriya," said Sheikh Ahmed, "and you know Miss Bannerman, of course." He stood aside to let Mahmoud greet the women.

"Yes, of course," said Mahmoud. "How are you, Miss Bannerman?" Then at last he let his eyes fall on his cousin, but they fell coldly, unable to smile, and he said perfunctorily in Arabic, "How are you, Badriya." He noticed with alarm that she was taller and looking considerably older than he had expected her to be.

She smiled faintly, with artificial coyness, turning her face a little to one side in the way of women in her country when speaking to a man, and drawled languidly:

"I am well . . . how are you?"

In the taxi, on the way to the hotel, Sheikh Ahmed and Miss Bannerman sat on the back seat and Mahmoud and Badriya on the stools facing them. Mahmoud was appalled at Badriya's emergent femininity. When he had seen her last she had still been a child, with no breast, no coyness. It wouldn't have been so bad if she were still like that. He could have treated her like a



child, treated his marriage like a long-term engagement. The last thing he had expected was that he would find her looking and beginning to behave so much like a woman. He felt utterly frozen in relation to her, and sat looking at his father and Miss Bannerman, finding a strange, soothing sympathy in the Englishwoman's face.

Sheikh Ahmed was very voluble and greatly thrilled with his first sight of the streets of London. His agile head turned swiftly from side to side, commenting, asking questions. He almost caught his breath at seeing his first London policeman, having often seen pictures of those commanding but courteous guardians of order, famous as the best police in the world. He noted with approbation, as the constable strode across the road in front of them to stop the other stream of traffic, that the reality did not fall short of the pictures, and his mind went back disparagingly to the corresponding whistling, baton-waving, shorter figures he had seen between the Gare de Lyon and the Gare du Nord in the morning.

"What's this square here?" he asked, as the taxi came out of Victoria Street into Parliament Square, quickly noticing its monumental character. "What's that building there?"

"The Houses of Parliament," said Mahmoud, "and that's Big Ben, the clock we hear on the wireless at home."

Pointing to the buildings, Sheikh Ahmed turned to Miss Bannerman with a grin. "So that's where your brothers hatch their evil designs on the world," he said in Arabic. Then to Mahmoud, "Tell her in English." He watched her face, pleased with his joke, while his son translated.

She nodded, laughing, then said, "Yes, that's where it was decided that I should be sent to teach your girls subversive ideas."

"No, no," said Sheikh Ahmed. "You don't teach them anything like that. You teach them to be nice young ladies. Look at Badriya. . . . What do you think of London, Badriya?"

"It's very nice," said Badriya, accepting London.

Mahmoud, looking at Miss Bannerman, thought, 'She must be pitying me. She knows how dull my cousin is!' He had a choking sensation, and was appalled at the hatred he felt for the girl. Without wanting it, without being responsible for it, only because of what others in their thoughtlessness had done, she had become his enemy. Hating her, he was conscious of the injustice of his hatred.

It was a characteristic of Sheikh Ahmed that he took to any new environment, provided it was superior enough, like a duck

to water. He now took to the Savoy like a duck to water, or more precisely, like a duck returning to a familiar and favourite pond. He was not awed by it. He was not disappointed in it. He just approved, and was soon walking up and down its passages as briskly and unselfconsciously as he walked on the verandahs of his own house, his portly belted middle thrust forward slightly, his shoulders and turbaned head thrown back—a posture whose dignity never became a swagger, and which was the product of self-importance only just accentuating the physical propensities of his figure.

He examined their rooms carefully, peering with special interest into the sanitary department, and pronounced himself satisfied. Then, while Miss Bannerman and Badriya were unpacking, he took Mahmoud into his room and locked the door.

Screwing his eyes into an expression of bewilderment, not entirely genuine, he said:

"What did you exactly mean by your last letter, the one about your marriage? . . . I didn't quite understand. You're not upset, are you?"

All Mahmoud's ideas of a compromise, the whole patient solution he had battered out of his resignation, collapsed. He said:

"I don't want this girl as a wife . . . and anyhow I don't want to be married at all yet. I can't accept what you've done."

"Can't accept? . . . What do you mean, Mahmoud? What are you saying, my son? What do you mean, you can't accept?"

"I mean that I can't accept a marriage concluded without my consent, without my knowing anything about it."

"Without your consent?" Sheikh Ahmed screwed his eyes another twist. "How without your consent? Hasn't it always been agreed you were to marry your cousin? Did you raise any objections when I asked you the summer before last, eh? Would I have dreamed of doing it if I hadn't had your acceptance, if——"

"That isn't true. You did it because you knew you didn't have my acceptance—because you were afraid that I would never give it. The answer I gave you when you asked me was an evasion; it wasn't consent. And you knew very well it wasn't. But you and my mother and my uncle were determined that I should marry Badriya, and you used the occasion of his dying to settle the matter, so that I shouldn't have a chance to refuse . . . isn't that the truth?" Carried by the momentum of his anger, Mahmoud stood glaring at his father with the full unmasked force of his accusation.

"No, by God! It isn't," said Sheikh Ahmed, convinced in the

heat of the moment that there wasn't a grain of perjury in his oath. "I had no reason at all to think that you didn't want this marriage, none, upon my honour . . . none!" Then, changing his tone suddenly into one of intimate, confidential, wheedling give-and-take, he went on, "But what is it you have against the girl? Don't you like her?"

"I didn't dislike her as my cousin, but I don't want to be married to her."

"Why? Isn't she beautiful? Isn't she ladylike? Isn't she of your own class and rank, the daughter of your uncle? What can you object to in her . . . that she isn't highly educated? She's as well educated as any girl of her age in our country and she's still young; her education can continue for as long as you like. That's why I've brought her with me on this journey. And when we go back we can arrange for her to have private lessons. I thought, maybe, you'd like her to take up French and music . . . we could buy her a piano. That's one of the things I have it in my mind to buy here, one of those big rounded pianos, like the one Sir William Carter has. . . . Come, my son, there is nothing to be upset about. Let's go down and have tea."

"But . . . but it can't be dismissed just like that," said Mahmoud, feeling furiously impotent.

"Well, what do you want me to do about it now?" said Sheikh Ahmed, flaring up. "Let you divorce her? . . . I can't do that to my brother's family, you know I can't."

"You can't face an embarrassment like that, and you want me to face a whole lifetime with a wife I don't want."

"Are you in love with some other girl?"

"No."

"Well, then, I don't understand, and you are being very unreasonable, very. You want to put me in an impossible position for no reason at all; I who want nothing but your happiness, who've thought of nothing but that since you were born. If I've broken my back sitting in the saddle six hours a day for the last twenty years, going round the cotton-fields, it was to amass a fortune for you, to make you independent for life, and to be able to give you the best English education so that the highest positions in our country should be within your reach. . . . And what am I asking of you now . . . to accept as your wife a hunchback, a pock-marked girl, a girl with one eye?"

Mahmoud looked at his father dumbly, overwhelmed by a sense of the distance that separated them, by the impossibility of making his reasons seem adequate to a man of his father's generation and

tradition. His father, indeed, was being liberal and enlightened far in excess of his age and tradition; he was not proposing to force on him an ignorant wife. He had brought her on an educational visit to England, and was going to buy her a grand piano! . . . Or was the distance between them really as great as all that? Didn't the old man in his heart understand his objections and feel guilty about what he had done? Wasn't he pretending not to understand merely because he had put himself into such an impossible position that he had now no alternative but to take that line?

"Why don't you answer?" said Sheikh Ahmed.

At last Mahmoud said: "It's impossible for me to treat her as a wife. She's a child. I have no feelings for her. I cannot behave towards her any differently from what I did before. That's what I want you to understand. We needn't talk about a divorce now, but I want my position to be quite clear. Here in England now, she's just my cousin, and I am not to be expected to take any notice of her in other ways . . . and please don't refer to her as my wife or my bride or anything like that."

"By God, your mother was right. You've become an Ingiliz, but we are not English, my son, nor can our life be like the life of the English."

Remembering his wife's shrewd intuitions, seeing his own facile charging optimism come once more to grief, Sheikh Ahmed suddenly felt weak, unsure of himself, intensely unhappy. He had had misgivings about the marriage from the beginning, but had taken a chance on it. The chance had not come off. The visit to England, which he had thought such a happy inspiration, was not going to come off. It seemed he had bungled everything.

"Don't let's talk about it any more just now," said Mahmoud, noticing the perplexed misery in his father's chubby face, the swift transparent plunge from gaiety and confidence to despair of someone who was still at heart a child. Absurdly he felt paternal towards his father. He had often experienced a reversal of the rôles between them, brought about by his poignant awareness of the old man's extreme, vulnerable *naïveté*.

Sheikh Ahmed, feeling the change of tone in his son's voice, said to him:

"You're a good lad, Mahmoud, my son. There's no compulsion on you to act in any way that's repugnant to your feelings. Do what you like for the present and, God willing, things will work out to your satisfaction. You mustn't let anything worry you now with your examinations only a week away. That's the most im-

portant thing just now for all of us. . . . How do you feel about them? I trust you are in a good state of preparedness. I saw the Director of Education before I left, and he told me they were expecting great things from you. . . . Come, let us go down."

They went downstairs with Miss Bannerman and Badriya, and had tea in the lounge. It was the first time Mahmoud had sat in one of the big luxury hotels of London, and he didn't like it. He hated the stiff, straight-laced sumptuousness of it, the pomp of opulence that filled it, feeling like a renegade socialist dallying in the palaces of capitalism.

"Nice hotel," said Sheikh Ahmed to Miss Bannerman, looking around him with restrained satisfaction, approving the liveried ceremonial and fur coats, gratified that the six hours a day in the saddle round the cotton-fields now enabled him to command all this in London.

"Too nice for me, I'm afraid, when I have to pay for myself," said Miss Bannerman, and Mahmoud sensed that her feelings about the place were the same as his, that even if she could afford it she would not stay there from choice, but would go to a smaller, less overpowering hotel. Yet he did not despise his father for liking it, or condemn him for his wealth and his pleasure in spending it. He could not be so absurd as to judge him by left-wing English standards, and he quickly rejected the suggestion that he and the Englishwoman were in a secret alliance of superior taste, perceiving that that would be a much uglier form of snobbery than his father's simple reactions.

Badriya became interested in the female toilettes that passed to and fro, in and out of the revolving doors. She followed each new vision with a gaze that was almost lively—a gaze that travelled and lingered with sensuous enjoyment along the unpredictable contours of hats, or of hatless golden and platinum corrugations, round the sweep of fur on shoulders, down the taut invisible face of silk on legs. She also became more articulate, turning to Miss Bannerman every now and then with a question, a comment or even an exclamation.

"Is that woman wearing stockings?" she asked after a close but vain scrutiny of a pair of highly-finished legs. "I can't tell," and she giggled with amusement.

"Nor can I at this distance," said Miss Bannerman.

"Why do they wear them if you can't tell?"

They became aware of a tall, white-haired woman standing in front of them, leaning on a stick. They had not realised that she

was coming towards them, until she stopped in her limping walk, facing Sheikh Ahmed with a friendly smile.

"Does the gentleman speak English?" she asked. She spoke with a slightly foreign accent, and there was a tremor of old age in her voice, but a wonderful candour breathed in it, a kindly authority.

"Please don't stand up," she added, noticing that the two men were about to rise, Sheikh Ahmed smiling and shaking his head, Mahmoud saying, "No, I'm afraid my father doesn't."

"Well, then you can interpret for me," said the old lady. Then turned again to Sheikh Ahmed, "I just want to congratulate you on your beautiful daughter. She has the most beautiful face I have ever seen, and I have seen many beautiful faces in my time . . . many."

She stood watching Sheikh Ahmed's face, while Mahmoud, without correcting her misconception of the relationship, explained it to his father and gave him a perfunctory translation of her speech. Then, seeing from his smiling eyes and the bow he gave her that her meaning had reached him safely, she smiled again, swept them all with a gracious nod and walked away, leaving them with a strange sense of having heard a judgment of unquestionable authority, of having been honoured by someone accustomed to bestowing honours.

Sheikh Ahmed was immensely pleased. He was too tactful to rub it in on Mahmoud in any way. Indeed, he dropped the subject like a hot brick the moment the old lady had turned her back on them. But he felt absolved, justified, triumphantly vindicated before this silly son of his. His thoughts, which he did not dare to utter himself, were put into words for him by Miss Bannerman.

"What a proud bridegroom you must feel, Mahmoud!" she said. "You know, I believe that woman is some ex-queen or other. I've seen her face in the papers."

And to his surprise, Mahmoud did feel proud. A perverse vanity in him was flattered by this compliment to the wife he did not wish to acknowledge. And when he looked at Badriya again and saw her still smiling with a touch of lively childish amusement at what the old lady had said, her physical loveliness struck him for the first time, her loveliness as a woman—the very things which had repelled and frightened him when his eyes had come to rest on her at the station and seen that she was no longer a child. With a shock, almost of consternation, he became sexually aware of her beauty, and it gave him a thrill of pleasure, fugitive but unmistakably possessive.

"So we shall soon be colleagues," said Miss Bannerman, turning to Mahmoud again when the episode of the old lady's pronouncement was over.

"Oh yes, but you'll be my senior by two years. I believe seniority is very important in Government service," he said, smiling.

She laughed. "As between men," she said, "but we women are really *hors cadres*. . . . What subjects are you going to teach at the college?"

"Ostensibly and at the beginning economics," he said, "but I hope that won't last very long."

"Oh, why?"

"Because my real interest is in philosophy, and I hope to persuade the authorities to start a philosophy course soon. We must have philosophy at the college, don't you think so?"

"Philosophy, philosophy, philosophy!" said Sheikh Ahmed in Arabic, butting in with a large grin as he recognised the word from the similarity of its sound in the two languages, and averse to being left out of the conversation for any length of time. "Don't let him bore you with his philosophy; he's got it on the brain." Sheikh Ahmed did not consider that philosophy was a suitable subject of discourse between men and women. He himself had quite an amateur's interest in the subject, had read several popular books on it in Arabic, and could hold forth with a considerable show of adroitness on Aristotle and Spinoza, particularly "Isbinoza," who was his favourite.

"No, no. I'm not bored at all," said Miss Bannerman. "On the contrary, I'm greatly interested." Then to Mahmoud, "I can't say that I've given the subject much thought from my humble primary-school level, but I find the idea very refreshing. I hope you succeed. . . . I read P.P.E. myself at Oxford."

"Did you really?" he said, pleased to find this bond with her. "Then when I've got that philosophy course going at the college, you must leave the primary school and come and join me. What Chair would you like? I want moral philosophy; apart from that, you can take your pick." Turning to his father, he said, "You thought philosophy would bore her? She studied it at Oxford; took the same course I'm taking."

He was happy now, on his favourite subject, in congenial company.

Miss Bannerman said, "I'm afraid I don't qualify for anything better than my little Chair at the school; I only got a third."

"The best people get firsts or thirds," said Mahmoud, "the two

are almost interchangeable. The only damning class is a second."

"The Chair for gallant sophistry would be the right one for you," said Miss Bannerman, "not moral philosophy!"

They laughed, and Sheikh Ahmed smiled in genial but unenlightened participation. Only Badriya remained impassive, neither understanding the cause of the mirth nor feeling the infection of it. Again Mahmoud looked at her, letting his eyes dwell for a moment on the chiselled curl of her lips, rather challenging in the aloof face, on the graceful swell of her breast, and the soft, subtle moulding of her arms and fingers, indolently, unconsciously lying on the side of her chair in faultless rhythm; and again he felt the secret glow in his blood. Her very coldness seemed in a strange way very attractive, gave her an air of remoteness enhancing her physical beauty.

"Good heavens," said Sheikh Ahmed. "You still do that?" Then, turning to Miss Bannerman: "Look at him! Next week he will graduate from Oxford, and he still bites his nails. At the Savoy, too!"

"It's cheaper than smoking," said Mahmoud, "and I always lose my nail-files." He gave Miss Bannerman a guilty smile.

## CHAPTER VI

SHEIKH AHMED had deemed it proper, according to Arab notions, that he should bring a present with him for Mahmoud's tutor. He had brought an expensive and highly elaborate silver and ivory ink-stand designed by himself and executed by the best craftsman in the town. Two ivory elephants facing one another across the width of an oblong ivory plain bore two silver ink-wells sunk in their massive backs. Their trunks curled upwards to meet in the middle, forming a W (Sheikh Ahmed was delighted with this happy convenience of Gilbert Wentworth's initial, and with himself for having conceived such a master-stroke of design). Some distance in front of the elephants and at right-angles to them, two camels, also in ivory, provided a suspension stand for the pens whose ends lay in the inverted arches formed by the humps and necks of the two animals. There were three ivory pens all ending in crocodiles' heads. Across the front of the stand a dedication in ornate Arabic script read: "From Ahmed Suleiman to the Mister Gilbert Wentworth, the Professor at Oxford University."

It was really a beautiful, if somewhat comical object—the



animals all exquisitely carved, subtly expressive; a worthy gift from Africa, in Sheikh Ahmed's opinion, to serve as an aid to Oxford scholarship, and he wanted to go to Oxford at once, invite Wentworth to dinner and present it to him. Before Mahmoud left them that evening, therefore, Sheikh Ahmed enjoined upon him to make a dinner date with his tutor for the earliest day possible. He would leave Badriya and Miss Bannerman in London, and go to Oxford especially for the occasion. Later, of course, when Mahmoud had finished with his examinations, they would all pay Oxford a longer visit, but he did not want to leave the meeting with Wentworth till then in case he might have gone away for the vacation. The prospect of meeting an Oxford don, a professional philosopher, with whom he might have the chance of exchanging views on Isbinoza, was not to be jeopardised.

Wentworth would be tickled to death, thought Mahmoud, arriving at his college. He was not accustomed to receiving gifts from his pupils' fathers or being invited to dinner by them—still less (for he could hazard a guess as to what would happen when his father and tutor met) to debating philosophy with turbaned sheikhs from Africa who could not even speak English. Knowing how unorthodox his father's interpretations of Spinoza could be, he shuddered indulgently at the prospect of being called upon to translate them to his tutor.

He was glad that the day he had dreaded so much had come and gone. It had not been too bad, this first meeting, his talk with his father. He liked Miss Bannerman. Her presence had been a great help. He had made his position for the present carefully clear, and no outrageous demands were going to be made on him. Of course, there had never been any danger of his being expected to sleep with Badriya while they were in England. The night of 'entry', as it was called, was the occasion of a very special ceremony, which in any case would have had to wait until they were back home. But now he was safe even from being expected to kiss her. His father had understood; he was not going to leave them alone together so that he might make love to her.

Make love to her. . . . He was twenty-three and he had never kissed a girl. In his country it had been very difficult, unless one went to prostitutes. In England he had been too colour-timid to try. And now, this girl, who had suddenly been revealed to him as a woman, whose lovely face arrested majesty in its limping walk, was his, was his wife. Her lips, her breasts belonged to him. At any time he could touch them. His body quivered with the urge of flesh for flesh from which his mind, demanding a mind behind

the desired flesh and not finding one, shrank and floundered in a strange conflict of repulsion and desire.

He fixed the dinner with Wentworth for two days later, and Sheikh Ahmed, carrying his parcel, came up in the afternoon. Miss Bannerman put him on the right train at Paddington and Mahmoud met him at the station.

It was a sun-flooded June afternoon. The grey buildings and the great beech and chestnut trees stood out nobly, suffused with light, cutting out the edge of their still, superb patterns against an enamel sky. The lawns in the quads stretched their smooth, generous immensities with a sweet abandon, golden-green in the sunshine like carpets in paradise, and though the houris were not in evidence, Sheikh Ahmed—making a mental reservation on the point—turned to his son, his eyes dilated with enchantment, and said:

“Mahmoud! If our Prophet’s paradise turns out to be anything like this, by God I shall be satisfied!”

At that moment, instead of houris, two undergraduates in scholars’ gowns emerged from a staircase and passed them going to Chapel. The flapping black wings shattered the harmony of Sheikh Ahmed’s vision. “Tfuh!” He spat symbolically. “God is our refuge from these devils in black. They belong to the other place!”

“I am sorry we have no houris,” said Mahmoud. “This is a monastic establishment, you know.”

“Of course, you have no houris, you dog. Do you think God is going to give all the delights of eternal bliss to the Nazarenes on earth? This is enough for them. The rest is only for the true believers—of whom, by His grace, I am one—or what say you?” A puckish tendency to peep through certain chinks and laugh at himself was one of the things in the old man that endeared him to his son. Chuckling affectionately, Mahmoud led him up to his tutor’s rooms.

“Mr Wentworth,” began Sheikh Ahmed when Mahmoud had introduced them and they had sat down, Sheikh Ahmed clasping his parcel discreetly against the folds of his jibba, “the teacher, the educator, has always been venerated among us Arabs. We have an old Arabic proverb which says, ‘To him who shall teach me one letter I shall become a bondsman.’ Now, you have taught Mahmoud many, many letters in the alphabet of philosophy, the noblest subject in all learning, and I am very grateful to you. That is why I have so much wanted to seize the opportunity of being

in England to pay my respects to you, and to offer you a small token of my esteem and gratitude. Please do me the honour to accept this little gift from my country."

This was the phrasing of what Sheikh Ahmed said in Arabic, and Mahmoud, smiling, but without embarrassment at its somewhat high-flown quality, interpreted it to Wentworth faithfully, knowing it would delight him, which it did.

"Please thank your father for his charming speech; tell him that I really envy his eloquence, and that I feel greatly honoured to receive him," he said, beginning to unpack the present. Then, removing his eyes from the wrappings for a second, he looked up sceptically at Mahmoud, saying: "Have I really taught you so much?"

Sheikh Ahmed smiled at the compliment on his eloquence. He had thought out this speech coming up on the train and was very pleased with the 'many, many letters in the alphabet of philosophy'. He was glad its elegance had registered; well, what would you expect? An Oxford don could not be lacking in literary taste. He looked in reverence at the massed learning in old leather on Wentworth's shelves; through the narrow window he saw a strip of ancient wall with a few battlements, the corner of a tower; from the evening sky the chiming of bells came to him—and in a moment of thrilled awareness he sensed the reality of Oxford: its charm, its serenity, its beauty and dignity from the past.

"But this is beautiful!" said Wentworth, taking out the inkstand, "and so very kind of you; really beautiful."

Mahmoud could see that there was more in Wentworth's warmth than an Englishman's super-politeness; the object really pleased him. He turned it admiringly from side to side. Then suddenly what Sheikh Ahmed had been waiting for happened: Wentworth saw the W of the elephants' trunks, and the surprise, delight and amusement that blended in his exclamation more than satisfied Sheikh Ahmed.

"Oh! But this is really a most charming touch," he said, finding the gesture almost moving.

"I designed that myself," said Sheikh Ahmed. "You see, I know my ABC."

"Brilliant! Brilliant!" said Wentworth, smiling in an ecstasy of appreciation at the meeting trunks. "A touch of genius!"

And from that moment he and Sheikh Ahmed got on together like a house on fire, so that by the time they reached Spinoza over the coffee at the Randolph, Mahmoud had shed all misgivings about conveying his father's views on that subject in an un-

censored form. Certain that Wentworth had taken the old man to his heart, he interpreted with reckless fidelity, while the two debated the Dutch lens-grinder's impact on the problem of evil, to Sheikh Ahmed's great satisfaction and Wentworth's huge delight.

As Mahmoud and his tutor rose to go back to their college, Sheikh Ahmed remembered something.

"Here," he said, fumbling in his pocket, "here is something for you from Miss Bannerman." He took out an envelope and handed it to his son. There was something in it heavier and harder than paper, a long, flat object nestling at the bottom. Mahmoud tipped it out on to his hand. It was a nail-file. . . .

Walking along the Broad, past the Sheldonian heads peering fantastically in the moonlight, Wentworth said:

"Your father is a most lovable man, Mahmoud. I don't think I've ever met a more delightful person. I mean it."

"I'm glad you like him," said Mahmoud, recalling the regal old lady's speech on Badriya. His heart glowed at the success of his people in England, warmed to his father. He felt intensely alive, happy with a new and strange excitement; and though he could scarcely believe it, he knew that this excitement had something to do with Badriya, with the fact that she belonged to him. He wondered what Wentworth would think of her, half wishing that she had come with his father.

He lay awake that night, and could not put Badriya out of his mind. Her image kept breaking in, and soon he surrendered to it, wanted it, chased it if it withdrew. He saw her again as she sat in the lounge of the Savoy, her film-smooth arms lying languidly on the arms of the chair. He saw the little dimple in the pit of her elbow and the slender rise of the vein behind it, and the curl of her lips when she smiled at the old lady's praise of her beauty. A sweet, teasing excitement coursed in his blood, leapt up from every image and stabbed him with a red-hot point of delight. Desires long inhibited surged up, conscious of the opportunity of a sudden freedom. At a cold distance, he had been able to imagine that he would not marry for a long time, to decide that the desire for a woman's body alone would not cause him to marry. It had not seemed possible to him that he could even be attracted by a female body in which the spark of mind did not glow . . . and now such a body, the cold physical beauty of it, had come to him and he desired it. Every time he remembered that it was his for the claiming, he thrilled with a spasm of excitement, pride and strange satisfaction. He would not have to wait for years, to

struggle with the temptation to degrade himself by going to prostitutes when he went back home.

The moonlight in the June sky stole into his room—for he never drew the curtains on clear summer nights, but left them apart and the window wide open so that he could see the stars as he did in his country, sleeping out on the terrace by the jasmin bush. A silver bar fell diagonally across the door leading into his sitting-room, touching the brass handle and shining back in a twinkling point from the metal. Slowly a fancy began to form in his mind as he gazed at it: that there was another bedroom beyond the door, that Badriya was sleeping in it, that the door was unlocked, and that all he had to do was to get up, open it and go in. The absolute ease of it, the utter accessibility, inflamed his desire. It was of a pattern with the passivity of Badriya's own face, with its coldness which excited him even more than her beauty, perhaps because it was the quintessence of it. . . . Suddenly, and for the first time since he had received his father's letter about the marriage, he wondered what her own feelings were; whether she liked him and would like him to make love to her. She had accepted the marriage as a matter of course; that was natural. Girls like her in his country had to accept their husbands, sometimes against their will, often without having a will of their own or knowing whether they were going to like them or not. He did not know whether he had it in him to please women. He had often feared that he hadn't, envying the confidence of other men and the successes that justified it.

In the room next door, though the door was unlocked, Badriya ceased to seem so accessible, and as his desire flared up in this uncertainty he became ashamed of it, ashamed because it was lust, and because the object of his lust was the girl he had recoiled from so violently at first. Even now he did not think he was falling in love with her. How could he? If he could have married an English girl, if he did not have to go back and live in his country and had found an English girl to marry him—that would have been the kind of marriage he wanted; a genial, equal companionship, a love of mind and body fused, talking together as he and Miss Bannerman had chatted at the Savoy. How could he ever talk with Badriya like that, and could she have ever thought of sending him a nail-file? Miss Bannerman was not beautiful like Badriya, but her face and body pleased him, and the rest—oh, how different! In other circumstances . . . but that was quite impossible. Miss Bannerman was completely inaccessible and Badriya was in the next room and really much lovelier, and he was hungry and

could just go in, and it would please his father, and in time, with more lessons from Miss Bannerman, and the grand piano, and travelling and his own influence, her mind would improve. So there was nothing to be ashamed of . . . and oh, God, he wanted her!

He got up from his bed stealthily, walked to the door from which the moonlight had passed, put his hand on the dark knob, turned it, and as the door opened, slowly, stood looking into the darkness of his sitting-room, trembling with the excitement of his rehearsal.

## CHAPTER VII

Two days before Schools, Mahmoud decided that he must see a doctor at once. He was in a panic, listless, strangely depressed about everything and unable to sleep. For a week he had heard every quarter-hour chime from St Mary's till three and four o'clock in the morning. And when he got up he saw absolutely no colour or significance in life. His whole vitality seemed to have ebbed out. There was no power in his legs, which tingled into pins-and-needles the whole day, and his hands secreted a thin chilly sweat. When he tried to revise, the lines would not fix in his thought. In Hall he had to force himself to eat. He spent long hours walking about, hoping to revive his spirits, but everything looked flat and the only result was that he became exhausted. He bought a thermometer and took his temperature. To his horror he found that it was two degrees below normal . . . and all the time his Finals were getting nearer.

He did not know any doctors at Oxford, and he felt helpless and incapable of taking action himself. His mind turned eagerly to his father. He rang him up early in the morning and told him he was coming to London to see him. His father had connections with their Government's agency in London, and the Agency had its own doctors. All he wanted was to be able to sleep.

Another and deeper reason for his desire to go to London was that he wanted to see Badriya again. It seemed desperately important that he should see her at once, to resolve a strange doubt which had somehow arisen in his mind and was tormenting him. This doubt was that she was not as beautiful and desirable as she had seemed on that night when he kept looking at the moonlight on the door. He found himself questioning the old lady's

authority and what his own eyes had told him at the Savoy, and he found this loss of faith maddeningly teasing. He wanted the object of his desire to be as entrancing as she had seemed; but when he strove to recreate the image, it did not always rise in that first perfection of splendour. Or rather there were two images, the one incredibly delectable, the other repellent. And only by seeing her again could he make sure which of the two was the real one.

When he arrived at the Savoy, he found his father waiting for him in the lounge. He told him why he had come. He did not wish to frighten him by describing all his symptoms, but only spoke of the insomnia and the worry it was causing him in view of his examinations.

"You're not scared of your exams, Mahmoud my son," said Sheikh Ahmed with a frown of worry. "Why, you've taken every exam in your life like a lion and always come out top. You're not ill, are you?"

"No . . . I don't know what's come over me. I expect I shall be all right if I see a doctor and he gives me something to make me sleep."

Panic, the sudden panic of remorse for something terrible, flared up in Sheikh Ahmed. This examination was to be the crowning glory of Mahmoud's education and the passport to future glories. For ten years Sheikh Ahmed had subordinated everything to its achievement for his son and for his father's pride. Had he now gone and thrown the prize away by upsetting Mahmoud with that marriage? Rather than do that, by God, he would . . .

"Mahmoud," he said with a quiet, determined earnestness, "is it your marriage that is doing this to you, my son?"

"No," said Mahmoud, "it's not that."

"Speak the truth, lad; don't be afraid to tell me. Because, if it is I promise you—and the Prophet be my witness—that I will save you from it; I will arrange a divorce. You know I want you to do your best in this examination, to justify all my great hopes of you. Everybody at home is expecting you to return with a good degree from Oxford; your career in the Government will depend on it. . . . I am prepared to face anything to ensure your success, do you understand me? No harm has been done yet; you've not gone in to her. Do you want a divorce? Say it now, my son."

Mahmoud looked away from his father for a long moment, unable to speak. Then he said quietly, still without looking:

"No, I don't want a divorce."

Sheikh Ahmed heaved a sigh of relief.

"Then, I'm sure it's a simple matter, thank God, and there's

nothing to worry about. A little passing nervousness. We'll go and see Dr Andrews. Come, let's go to the Agency."

Awkwardly, as they rose to go, Mahmoud said, "And where's Badriya and Miss Bannermen?" He had been disappointed not to see them when he came in and found his father alone; and while they were speaking he had been watching the lifts, hoping they would be coming down from their rooms.

"Oh, they've gone to Richmond," said Sheikh Ahmed. "Miss Bannerman has a friend who lives there, and she's taken Badriya to visit her. They said they might have lunch there. They had arranged to go before they knew you were coming, and when you rang up, Miss Bannerman offered to cancel the trip; but I wouldn't let her. Badriya was keen to go, and it's very good for her to visit English houses in England and mix with families. But you can ring them up, if you wish. Miss Bannerman left me her friend's telephone number; here it is." Sheikh Ahmed produced a slip of paper from his pocket and, gazing at it with a smile of portentous concentration, held at some distance from his eyes, read out slowly and hesitantly, first the numerals, then his Arabic rendering of the name of the exchange, which he had scribbled down to amuse himself underneath the English word written by Miss Bannerman—"Sree, four, six, sree . . . Bobs-grov." Then, beaming majestically at his son he asked, "How's my English getting on, Mahmoud, eh?" And he passed him the slip.

"Wonderful," said Mahmoud.

"Do you want to ring up and ask them to come back to lunch?"

"No; it's all right," said Mahmoud, raging at himself for affecting this indifference.

"What time are you thinking of going back?"

"Oh, some time in the afternoon," he said vaguely.

"Then you'll probably see them before you go, anyhow."

He was piqued that she had been keen to go to Richmond even after knowing that he was coming, and while his father watched the hopping pigeons as they passed Trafalgar Square, he sat worrying the nail of his thumb with an unusual concentration of energy. The nail-file lay in his pocket. All the past week he had punctiliously transferred it from pocket to pocket.

"Just a little attack of nerves," said Dr Andrews; ". . . the prima donna before the curtain rises; the race-horse at the starting-post . . . nothing to worry about. We'll soon put that right." He gave Mahmoud a prescription for sleeping-tablets, to be taken that night and the next, and during the examinations if needed. Then he turned to Sheikh Ahmed. He had been their family doctor for



many years at home, before he retired from the Service and became the Agency's consultant in London.

"And how do you like England, Sheikh Ahmed?" he asked. "Our rain, our lifeless sky? But the weather hasn't been too bad this week."

"It's been wonderful," said Sheikh Ahmed. "I can't tell you what a great impression your country has made on me, Dr Andrews—greater even than I expected." Then he added, "That leaves you no excuse, no excuse whatever."

"No excuse for what?"

"For wanting to grab half the world, instead of remaining peaceably at home and being contented with what God has given you. Upon my life, Dr Andrews, you English are a very voracious people! I shall forgive you if you honour your word and leave our country when it can stand on its own feet, as you say you will. But God help you if you don't, and I'm still alive. I should either fight you to the death or, better still, come here and colonise a little bit of England myself."

He walked, laughing, to the door. Then Dr Andrews said:

"And you've made a great impression on England, too, by all accounts."

"I?" said Sheikh Ahmed, in a shock of delight rather than modesty.

"You and your party. . . . Mr Raikes of the Agency tells me you've brought a beautiful niece with you who's the rage of the Savoy."

"That's the daughter of my brother, Yacoub," said Sheikh Ahmed, afraid to say any more in Mahmoud's presence. "You remember Yacoub. He died a few months ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

It was half-past twelve when Mahmoud and his father got back to the hotel. In the taxi on the way, the desire to ring up Popesgrove 3463 teased him abominably. If I ring up as soon as we arrive at the hotel, he thought, there will be time for them to get back to lunch. I will say to my father, 'I think I will ring up after all; perhaps it is more courteous to Miss Bannerman that I should ring up and ask her to join us for lunch.' I will just say 'her'.

But as they walked into the hotel, Sheikh Ahmed said, looking at the clock:

"If they haven't come by now, I don't suppose they will be coming for lunch; it's getting rather late."

"Yes," said Mahmoud, and could not add any more. He knew that his eagerness to see Badriya would delight his father, if he

would reveal but one-tenth of it; but even that he was utterly unable to do.

They had lunch alone. He ate very little, and when his father, noticing his small helpings and lack of interest in them, remonstrated with him, he complained of the closeness of the June weather. Sheikh Ahmed himself complained of the foreign food. He missed his favourite home dishes—the chicken stuffed with rice, almonds and raisins, the spicy salads green-sprinkled with mint, the shredded pastry sweets.

"May God exterminate this tasteless food of the infidels," he grumbled. Then added, finding consolation, "No, . . . let it be. This is our only superiority over them. This and our faith in the Prophet and the Last Day." He smiled and pushed the plate away. But when the waiter asked him how he had liked it, not wishing to hurt the man's feelings because he had recommended the dish, Sheikh Ahmed said: "Good; very nice."

When four o'clock came, and the revolving doors, from which Mahmoud's eyes had rarely wandered and then only for a second in the hope of giving himself a surprise when he looked back—still revolved emptily for him, his anger began to mount. Frustration was turning into a hot, vindictive resentment with the Englishwoman and with Badriya herself. . . . She had been keen to go away, and she did not seem to be at all keen to come back! She was obviously enjoying herself at Richmond . . . perhaps this friend of Miss Bannerman had brothers and they were making a fuss of her and she liked it. . . . The door swung and swung again; people dribbled or poured in; men, women, tall, short, thin, fat—everybody in London, except her. His anger, steeped in a vague tantalising jealousy, lashed round and round. It was half-past four.

"When are these girls coming back?" said Sheikh Ahmed, who had been sporadically dozing for some time and now finally woke up with a start. "What about tea? When must you go back?"

Mahmoud looked at his watch, though the clock was visible to him, and said, "I must go back soon. I don't think I can wait till they come." He could, but he would not. He would go in a moment, just to show everybody, including himself, that he didn't care a damn. Of course, he didn't care. How humiliating it was that he should have made such a fool of himself. . . . A slip of a stupid girl whose marriage to him had filled him with such horror until a week ago! . . . And his finals the day after tomorrow! Kant and Descartes, the problem of evil, the Hegelian dialectic. . . . He felt exalted beyond the reach of passion by these

stately reflections. How paltry and degrading a thing was desire for a girl, matched against the logic of Aristotle!

Thus fortified by the majesty of philosophy, he looked at the swinging doors once more in a rehearsal of indifference—and caught his breath. Badriya had just been wafted in by a gentle revolution of the door and was gliding towards them on a breeze. Several pairs of eyes had turned round and were looking at her. She was wearing a salmon-pink coat and her white muslin scarf, and five slender gold bracelets hung together in a graceful slant at her wrist, held up from further sliding, but only just, by the languid, exquisite sloping of her hand.

Mahmoud's doubts of her beauty and the logic of Aristotle were annihilated in the same flash. She flicked the Hegelian dialectic with the tip of the little finger of her right hand, curved and slightly apart from the others, and it vanished. Poor Dr Johnson may not have disproved Berkeley when with his clumsy bear's foot he kicked a stone; but from the dainty point of her white shoes as they lifted at each step from the carpet, whole schools of philosophy fell down routed to right and left.

"Oh, you're still here," she said, and he could not tell whether she was pleased or quite indifferent. The refinement of her features, and the remoteness of her eyes under that shade of emphasis in the natural, static lift of the eyebrows, gave her the air of a much older, infinitely more sophisticated woman, an air of haughty boredom which made her strangely, excitingly attractive.

"Yes," he said, his voice matching the distance of her eyes, "but I have to go soon. . . . I hope you enjoyed yourself at Richmond."

"I hope you're not very angry with us," said Miss Bannerman, coming up. "Have you been here all the day? Why didn't you ring up?"

"Oh, there was no need to; I only came on business today."

"We had a lovely time," said Badriya. "We went for a bicycle ride."

"I didn't know you could ride a bicycle," said Mahmoud. "Where did you learn?"

She gave a little laugh. "I learned today," she said, "at Richmond." Then she raised her arm to show a slight bruise where she had fallen and grazed it on a tree. "Look," she said.

Her arm was within his reach, and as the angle to which she had raised it left most of the bruise hidden in shadow, he felt with quick cunning that he could hold her hand and draw it closer without betraying anything more than a mild interest in the injury. He did so. He took her fingers in his hand. She let her arm extend

as he drew it to expose the bruise. It was the first time he had felt her skin. The smooth, seemingly boneless fingers lay curled in his hand, and the inside of the arm, showing the blue mark in the pure bronze skin, sloped up fully stretched to the elbow, dimpled as he had remembered it, with a glimpse of the vein in the little depression.

"Is it hurting?" he asked, trying to sound medical, still holding her hand, but as a doctor might.

"No, it's nothing," she said.

Feeling that he had exhausted the excuse, he had to let go of her hand. On her the momentous incident did not seem to have made any effect at all. He was sure that she had felt nothing, either when he took her hand or when he let it go. Also, it seemed that her ten days in England had done away completely with the artificial coyness she had displayed at the station. She looked at him as though he were nobody in particular.

"You mustn't blame me for leading your wife astray," said Miss Bannerman. "This was her idea, not mine, and she was very determined about it, I can tell you. She saw my friend's younger sister coming in on her bicycle, and insisted on having a try."

"It was easy," said Badriya. "I knew I could do it."

"She was really plucky," said Miss Bannerman, feeling warmer towards the girl than she had done since the beginning of their trip; it was the first time she had seen her excited about anything. She proceeded to give Mahmoud a description of the performance. "You ought to have seen her," she said. "She went at it with a will of steel and a heart of oak. I've never seen anybody attack a bicycle so fiercely. Within half an hour, the poor brute, with a few more scars than Badriya's one bruise, was completely tamed, and performed as obediently as a circus pony!"

Badriya laughed. "Do you remember that little boy—how frightened he looked when I came down the hill and fell near him?"

"Splendid!" said Mahmoud, looking at her with pride in something more than her physical beauty. "When I've finished with my exams, we must get bicycles and go riding—all three of us."

"Yes, we must," said Badriya. "We must." Then turning to Miss Bannerman, "Will you come?"

He was annoyed. His inclusion of the Englishwoman had not been sincere; he wanted to have Badriya alone. In a moment of inspiration, he had grasped the possibilities of cycling . . . he could never begin to woo her as long as he always saw her with

his father or Miss Bannerman; could not even talk to her naturally, say nice things to her, show her little attentions. . . .

As they were finishing their tea, a cherubic page in green and brass appeared before them and summoned Sheikh Ahmed to the telephone. Miss Bannerman said, "I think I'll go up to my room for a moment"; and followed him. Badriya did not move, and they were alone.

She did not look at him. Reclining aloofly against the corner of the settee, one arm resting in arrogant ease along the full length of its side so that the wrist lay on the edge and the hand hinged gracefully from it, she looked about her without moving her head, at the people in the lounge and the stream that passed through the doors.

At first Mahmoud could not speak. Fumbling for something to say, he pretended to be, like her, indifferent to present company and only languidly interested in the general movement and dispositions around them.

"What did you see at Richmond?" he asked at last, daring to look at her.

"I saw the river," she said, but looking again, after glancing at him for a second, in the direction of the door where a man and a woman had just walked in. "It was very nice . . . look at that lady, isn't she beautiful?" He followed her eyes to the door without interest, then looked back at her.

"She's not one-tenth as beautiful as you, Badriya," he said.

"But she's so fair," she said longingly, "so white and pink. I wish I were like that. Don't you think that a white skin is much nicer than black?"

"But yours isn't black," he said; "it is a very lovely brown."

She didn't answer and she had lost interest in the beautiful blonde. She turned to him with a little eagerness in her face.

"Will you teach me to swim?" she asked. "We saw people swimming in the river at Richmond. I want to learn; will you teach me?"

"Of course."

"Don't tell Uncle Ahmed," she said, seeing her father-in-law coming back from the telephone, his purple robes fluttering in brisk, corrugated circles along the carpet. "He may not think it proper for me to swim where there are men. . . . Take me to the shops now; I want to buy a costume." It was ten to five and he had been thinking of catching a train back to Oxford at 5.30, but he said eagerly, "All right; come along."

"Ah!" said Sheikh Ahmed, seeing them rise as he arrived, "where are you going?"

"Badriya wants to buy a few things, and wants me to take her to the shops," said Mahmoud.

"Very good, very good," said his father, warmly approving these developments. "Have you got enough money?"

"Yes; I have."

"Here," said Sheikh Ahmed, "take this to be on the safe side." And producing his wallet, he took out two ten-pound notes and gave them to his son. "One can see you don't know yet what it is to take a woman shopping. . . . What train are you taking back to Oxford?"

"I think I'll go by the 7.12."

Sheikh Ahmed smiled contentedly to himself, seeing them walking out together and noting the ease with which Mahmoud had found it possible to delay his return to Oxford.

They took a taxi and went to Harrods.

"Do you know what kind of bathing-costume you want to buy?" he asked her on the way. "Did you see anything that pleased you specially?" He felt acutely her complete self-composure and unawareness of him except as a means to the fulfilment of her immediate purpose. A moment before, she had let him hold her hand as a doctor; now she was taking him as a guide to the shops.

She said, "Yes; I want a two-piece suit, a white one . . . white or silver. Do you think I shall find one like that at the shop we're going to?"

"We can try more than one shop; we'll go on trying till you find what you want." He was amused, pleased at her audacity; and he wanted her to feel the warmth of his offer.

"A girl at Richmond was wearing one like that. It looked very lovely. . . . Do you think I would look nice in it?" There was a challenging vanity in the look she gave him, and a touch of conscious devilry which surprised him; but the question was coldly impersonal—was not, 'will you find me nice in it?' but, 'will I be nice in it for the world to admire?'

Piqued by her indifference, he said, "No, I don't think so."

"No? Why not?"

"It may not suit your figure."

"Why shouldn't it suit my figure? What is wrong with my figure?"

"Nothing, of course, but what suits one person doesn't always suit another." He lied, knowing she had the perfect figure for a two-piece suit and would look exquisite in it. But he wanted to

hurt her, as much as a moment before he had wanted to please her as much as even now he desired to do so underneath the impulse to wound. He wanted to stab her into some recognition of himself, some positive reaction, even of anger.

"I see," she said, and he felt the resentment in her voice. "But I want it, all the same; I think it will suit me." He knew he had succeeded, and the little tension in her as she became quiet again pleased him; he felt her for the first time alive in relation to him.

A moment later she said, "And what sort of suit, do you think, would look nice on me?" Her voice wavered between a slight sullen sarcasm and diffidence.

Moved and pleased by the diffidence, he said:

"I was teasing you. You'd look very nice in it . . . much nicer than the girl at Richmond."

"But you didn't see her; how do you know?"

"I don't have to see her," he said; "it is enough that I see you."

"You are a funny person. One moment you say one thing, and the next moment you say something different. I don't know when you speak the truth."

"When I tell you nice things, I am speaking the truth," he said. . . . How stupid and unkind of him to be angry because she had no feelings for him yet! What had he done since her arrival to please her?

She found exactly what she wanted at Harrods. In fact, she found more. Among the half-dozen specimens which the bewildering enterprise and insinuation of the saleswoman laid at her feet, in swift response both to her intimated and to her as yet uncoined desires, Badriya fell in love with two—a white one and a yellow one—and oscillated painfully between them. The saleswoman, Polonius-like, oscillated with her, drawing out the excellence of each, as Badriya inclined now towards the one and now towards the other.

"This one is very much the fashion just now," she said, seeing Badriya's eyes dwell lovingly on the white. . . . "And, of course, just made for the young lady's figure." She gazed at Badriya with a glow of admiration almost unrelated to salesmanship. Then, prompt on her cue, as Badriya turned her eyes on the yellow, "But then, that's lovely too, with perhaps a little more individuality, a little more *chic*. . . ."

Mahmoud, having noticed the resemblance to Polonius, could not resist saying, with an air of the utmost innocence, "But isn't it fashionable, too?"

"Oh yes," said the saleswoman, "very fashionable . . . really just

as fashionable as the other; some perhaps would consider it even a little more so because of the colour, which is quite the vogue this season."

"And would you say," he continued with the same solemnity, "that the other is lacking in individuality?"

"Oh no! I wouldn't say that. . . . It has, how shall I say?" she hesitated for a moment, then ended brilliantly and undefeated, "its own type of individuality."

"Well," said Mahmoud, "the only thing to be done then is to have them both."

"Both!" said Badriya with startled delight.

"Yes; both."

"Very good, sir. . . . I'm sure Madam will find them equally delightful to wear, and look just as lovely in one as in the other."

"It's nice to have the two," said Badriya as they walked away, carrying the parcel. "I shall try them both on in my room to-night." Then she giggled. "And I will fill the bath and lie in it."

Mahmoud was thinking that if Miss Bannerman had been with them she would have relished his little leg-pull of the salesgirl; and that, as they had turned to leave, he could have further delighted her by whispering in her ear, "Methinks 'tis backed like a weasel . . . very like a whale!" Whereas Badriya, of course, had registered nothing.

"Would you like an ice-cream?" he asked.

"Yes . . . where?"

"Here . . . come this way."

"Oh, this is like the Underground," she said, seeing the moving stairs, "let us go down on it."

But she was still inexperienced, and in her nervousness she swayed and nearly fell backwards. He was behind her and caught her with his right arm. He kept his arm round her waist, after steadying her, standing close to her, his mouth almost touching her cheek. Her waist was slender and lithe in his arm, and her skin smoother than the smoothest silk in the near focus of his eyes.

When they reached the bottom, he moved with her as she stepped off, and her weight, again thrown back slightly, pressed his arm. She laughed, excited from her adventure.

"Did you enjoy the shopping?" he asked when they were in the taxi going back, more excited now at being alone with her than on the outward journey. He had bought her two bathing-suits and an ice-cream, and he had put his arm round her and felt the full length of her body against him for a few moments.

"Yes," she said. "Nobody would have bought me those costumes



but you. Uncle Ahmed would have thought either too indecent, and Miss Bannerman would have thought two very extravagant."

"Miss Bannerman is Scotch," he said, "and the Scotch are famous for not liking to spend much money."

They were entering the Strand from Trafalgar Square, and in another moment would be back at the hotel. They had been out together nearly an hour, but no mention had been made by either of them of their marriage. . . . Her hand lay lovely and relaxed on her knee, a few inches from his own, the wrist loosely imprisoned in the slender bracelets. . . . They would be at the Savoy in a moment, and if he didn't do it at once he would have to wait for at least another week. . . . And she was his wife, damn it!

"Do you like being married to me, Badriya?" he asked, taking her hand.

"You are my cousin," she said, as though that, if nothing else, made it natural for her to accept the situation. She left her hand in his passively.

"But you like me, don't you?" He played gently with her fingers.

"Why should I not like you?"

"I love you, Badriya," he said. "I want you to love me." He pressed the hand and released it. The taxi had gone into the Savoy enclosure and was pulling up, the gloved hand of the commissioner already reaching for the door.

Mr Raikes, the young official from the Agency, had called on Sheikh Ahmed in their absence to discuss with him the terms of a contract with the Government for which Sheikh Ahmed had tendered, and he was still there when they returned, having his third whisky-and-soda.

Sheikh Ahmed introduced Mahmoud and Badriya. Still afraid of angering his son despite the developments of that day, he introduced Badriya merely as his niece; and Mahmoud sat down sullenly, feeling strangely jealous because his possession of Badriya had not been proclaimed to this handsome, fair young Englishman, on whom the impact of Badriya's beauty was quite noticeable. His blue eyes, with a roving freedom enhanced by the whisky, began to quit Sheikh Ahmed's face, even at moments critical for the contract, and swivel to the vision that sat on the other side. Mahmoud saw them time after time coming to rest on his wife's face or on some portion of her body; and his secret pride became a burning jealousy. The Englishman was very good-looking in a Nordic way, his eyes a pure sky-blue and his complexion glowing like fire on ice. Mahmoud remembered the blonde who

had come in through the door earlier in the afternoon, the rapture with which Badriya had gazed at her, and what she had said about white skins and black.

Sheikh Ahmed had said all that he wanted to say on the subject of the contract, and feeling that his visitor's interest in the matter was also exhausted, turned round to face the company as a whole, indicating that business was over and that the occasion could now become a social one.

Mr Raikes, delighted at this release, swung round in his chair to face the object of his enchantment in her lovely entirety. To him she looked seventeen or eighteen, and her face had an attraction far beyond her years.

Speaking to her in Arabic, as he had been speaking to Sheikh Ahmed, he said, smiling charmingly, "I hope you like England."

"Yes," she said in the same language, "I like it very much; it is very nice."

"You must speak to her in English," said Sheikh Ahmed. "She speaks it well."

"Oh, really!" said Mr Raikes, looking at Badriya. "Splendid!" Then, to Sheikh Ahmed, "Have you been about much yet, or are you spending all your time in London?"

"I have been to Oxford, but otherwise business has kept me in London till now. When it's all finished and my son's examinations are over, we mean to travel about a bit and see other parts of England."

"You must. . . . Look here, I live in the country not far from London, in Kent. Have you heard of Kent? The most beautiful county in England. . . . And I have a car. Perhaps you'd like me to run you down to my place one afternoon, or during a week-end. It's a lovely drive, and my people would love to see you." He said this generally, then added, looking again at Badriya, "Would you like that?"

"Thank you. Yes, I would," she said.

"Thank you very much, Mr Raikes," said Sheikh Ahmed. "We would love to come."

Mr Raikes spoke to Badriya again. "My people have got horses; do you ride?"

"Yes, I used to ride." There were plenty of horses on Sheikh Ahmed's farm, and she had often ridden there when she was younger and before the decorum necessary at puberty had stopped her.

"Can you jump over fences?" he asked.

"No, I haven't done that."

"I'll teach you," he said. "It's great fun. You must learn to jump before you leave England; all the best ladies here do."

She laughed, excited and amused.

"I think it's time for me to go," said Mahmoud, looking at his watch, a terrible anger of jealousy raging in him.

"It's nearly dinner-time," said his father. "Couldn't you have dinner with us, and take a later train?"

"No. I must go now." He wallowed in the added pain of forcing himself to leave her in the company, which she seemed to be enjoying, of the odious Englishman who showed no sign of wishing to leave.

"I suppose it's time for me to be moving too," said Mr Raikes without conviction, lounging pleasantly in his alcoholic and sensuous intoxication.

"No, no," said Sheikh Ahmed, his Arab's sense of hospitality dictating an automatic invitation to a visitor who proposed to take his leave when a meal was imminent. "You can't go now; we shall be having dinner in a moment. You must stay and honour us with your company. I insist."

The insistence, without having to be prolonged, was completely successful.

"Oh, that's awfully kind of you," said Mr Raikes. "The honour and the pleasure will be entirely mine."

His rage and misery gathering into them this last straw, so gratuitously, so obtusely dropped by his father, so eagerly picked up by the Whiteskin, Mahmoud rose to go.

"Won't you change your mind?" asked his father.

"No. I must go." He scarcely looked at Badriya as he took his leave. His father walked with him to the door.

"Listen, Mahmoud," he said, bidding him good-bye, "don't let me hear any more about this nervousness before an exam; pull yourself together, lad, and good luck to you. I shall expect the best of results. . . . Take that medicine and get yourself some good sleep."

## CHAPTER VIII

THE first day of the P.P.E. finals broke, a hot, sultry morning, but dull under a blanket of low cloud. Then it began to rain, as the candidates for the various examinations streamed down the High, wearing their white ties and carrying their mortar-boards,

so that some of them, finding the caps useful for once, put them on their heads.

Mahmoud walked down with Michael Humphries and two other friends from his college. Pythagoras was not with them, as his mathematics finals were not due to start for another week.

"I'm in a blue funk," said Humphries; "there's a monstrous vacuum in my head and nature doesn't seem to be abhorring it at all. . . . How about you? Do you remember your jolly little categories, or whatever you call them?"

"Worse," said Mahmoud, and he was not joking, as he knew Michael was. In spite of Dr Andrews' tablets, he had slept very little the last two nights. The sweaty weakness of the previous week, the tingling sickness of body and mind that seemed to have drained his vitality, was still upon him. He felt no excitement, no interest. He was too dejected even to panic. Only a great unbearable apathy filled him.

They met Amin outside the Examination Schools. He was laughing—gay and voluble in his excitement. "Don't forget," he said breezily to Mahmoud when they parted to go into their separate halls, "the honour of the old country is at stake today; go in and conquer. . . . *En avant!* All the best. See you later."

The jocular challenge fanned a painful flicker in Mahmoud. He had so wanted to do well in this examination, not only on his own account, but also for his father's sake and for the sake of his country. He and Amin were the first two of its sons ever to sit for an Oxford Honours School. When his father had said that everybody at home was looking forward to his result, it had not been just a vain father's dramatisation. His career had become a sort of dramatic test-case. The Education Department and the Chief Secretary—the champions of progressive policy in the territory—hoped that with a first-class honours degree from Oxford he would strengthen their hand against the die-hards and justify their pressure for putting natives into the highest posts; while his own countrymen, burning with the fever of nationalism, wanted him to prove that a black African skin was no bar to the highest intellectual achievement. There had never been any question of Amin getting a first, particularly since he had taken to painting, but . . . God, what had happened to him, what was going to become of Wentworth's confident prediction?

He walked on looking about him apathetically, at his fellow candidates, at the examiners in front, at the desks on which the papers lay already in waiting challenge. . . . If only this dejection would leave him, if only some interest and animation would stir in his

mind, his nerves would stiffen with a little energy, his thoughts grip, instead of floating like shapeless wisps of cotton-wool!

He sat down and read the questions. Most of his favourite themes were there, and the material from which to shape the answers was in his mind somewhere. Desperately he summoned the will to gather it, breathe some life into it and put it on paper. And with the fraction that came he drove his pen for three hours.

It was a floundering, disconnected performance, and he knew it. He wouldn't give himself more than a gamma on that paper. But there were seven others. He could still pull up . . . one gamma was not fatal.

He tried to rouse himself, with his lover's pride, with the desire to shine in the eyes of his mistress. Even though she did not know much about firsts and thirds in Oxford finals, he thought, the fuss that would be made of his success would impress her and give him glamour. But though the thought excited him, the sickness remained, and he knew instinctively that this sickness itself was centred in Badriya—in his first violent recoil from her, in the secret, ashamed desire that came after that recoil and in the tormenting war that was even now going on between the two. He knew it was the silly, ignominious sickness of the first fixation of desire; a kind of erotic measles—green sickness, they called it. . . . And a weakness like that, which he was unable to control, held him in this abject slavery at the crisis of his Oxford career and was going to ruin his finals! To see it, to be unable to resist it—this senseless, unconscious tyranny of the flesh-god, subjugating life and making a mockery of every conscious purpose; corrupting the mind itself into vile treachery and self-denial! In this thralldom, his mind was not only useless because his body was sick with unfulfilled love; it had hired itself to the tyrant, to be employed on his whims, fancies, jealous uncertainties, instead of striving freely for the dignity of self-fulfilment—and even to whisper in his ears that the satisfaction of his body's sick desire was more important than all philosophy and examinations and careers, and that he wanted it now more than all the alphas in the world!

He did a little better on his afternoon paper, in fact, quite a lot better. Certainly, he thought, a good beta, and with luck an alpha. If he could maintain that progress the next day, the position might yet be retrieved. On the strength of returning hope, he went to a pub that evening with Amin, Jim Powell and Michael Humphries, and drank two pints of beer. Amin was cheerfully confident of having so far done well enough to qualify for that third beyond which his aspiration did not soar.

"How did you get on?" Mahmoud asked Humphries. "Did that vacuum fill up in the end?"

Humphries confessed that somehow it had, and that on the whole he did not think he had done too badly.

"Which, I suppose, means," said Mahmoud, laughing, "in the masterly meiosis of the English, that you've got two nice, fat, juicy alphas in the bag." He enjoyed the smart intellectual badinage. His mind felt on top again, sporting with its peers.

But in bed, after the pub, the sickness came again and he could not sleep, though he had taken a double dose of the tablets. He was sure Badriya preferred the handsome Englishman to him. There was more interest behind the veil of her eyes when they looked at the blue-eyed man than ever when they looked at him. Her amused, excited laugh when the rival had said he would teach her to jump fences stabbed again in his ears . . . then his heart began to throb violently. Perhaps his father would accept that invitation some day this week. Perhaps they had gone out with Raikes, and she had sat next to him in the car, and he had helped her into the saddle, holding her foot while she mounted. . . . He saw the returning light and heard four o'clock strike before he went to sleep.

Of the three hours on the morning paper, he spent two trying to do one question—striving after threads of thought that slipped or snapped or tied themselves in sprawling tangles. In the third hour he attempted two questions, scratching their surface in a hurried, planless manner, frantic with the sense of disaster and slipping time.

There was no hope after that, no hope even of a second. If he went on like that he would fail . . . fail in his finals! And if you failed once in an honours finals, you could not sit for it again. There was no second chance. Perhaps his only chance was to give up and apply for an *ægrotat*. They gave degrees to candidates who were prevented by illness from finishing their exams. But what was his illness, what could he say? That he could not sleep and had no energy? They would think it was funk. They wouldn't give an *ægrotat* on that, and he couldn't face the disgrace of it. . . . And the real disgrace, the disgrace of failing because he was too love-sick to sleep or think. . . . God, funk—honest, straightforward loss of nerve—was less humiliating than that. No thought of Antony throwing away the battle of Actium, or of Parnell forfeiting the Irish leadership and Mr Gladstone's favour, came to comfort him.

He went straight to his room, slumped into a chair, and stared

into the grate, its black, dead emptiness in the idleness of summer curiously reflecting the image of his own soul. They spoke to each other of the fires that once had burned but now burned no more. His scout brought him some cold salmon for lunch, at which he nibbled ineffectually. He thought if he could snatch half an hour's sleep it would revive him for the afternoon. He lay back with his eyes shut, but his sick, tired, panic-tossed consciousness would not surrender itself for a moment. At ten to two he went back to the Examination Schools, like a gambler who knows he is ruined but returns for a last throw.

And like a gambler, when this last throw had brought nothing, he left the tables before the game was ended. There was still half an hour, but he could make no use of it. He had spent two and a half hours struggling with two questions and a total inability to concentrate. He could face no more.

The low cloud, which had persisted from the previous day till noon, had lifted, and Magdalen Tower pierced the solid blue sky superbly like a silver shaft as he stepped out into the street. For a second the vision lifted him out of himself in an act of unconditional worship, then crushed him with its cruelty. Lowering his eyes, he crossed the road and entered his college, making for his rooms. In the lodge, Harris, the old porter, greeted him with a smile.

"How's it going, sir?" he asked. "Well, I hope." For fifty years, first as a junior in the lodge and then as head porter, Harris had addressed this question at frequent intervals during Schools week to his favourites among the succeeding generations of undergraduates. The formula had not varied in fifty years, but there were shades of difference in the friendly concern, depending on the warmth he felt for each. And it was a source of annual pride for him when his special friends got firsts and he could underline with red ink their names in the lists hung up in the lodge. Mahmoud was one of his favourites that year, not only because he gave him generous tips, but because the old man had felt fatherly towards him from that first day three years ago when he had seen him standing by himself in the lodge crowded with English freshmen—a lonely-looking black boy.

To his warm, "Well, I hope," Mahmoud answered with mechanical formality, "Yes, thank you, Harris," and pressed on, stabbed again and again by that red-ink line which Harris would not be able to draw. Then as he began to cross the quad, he saw Wentworth coming out of staircase 3 on the other side. He turned his face quickly and lengthened his stride. But it was too late;

Wentworth had seen him, had veered round, and was coming to meet him, cutting across the grass.

"I was hoping you'd come and report," he said. "What's it been like so far? I thought yesterday's papers were good, and very much up your street. Didn't you like them?"

"The papers were all right," said Mahmoud; "but I wasn't in much of a form. I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you."

"I shall believe that when I see it. The best work in Schools is invariably done by those who think they haven't done so well." Then he added with a twinkle, "I hope you managed to work in your 'commendable rectitude' in that question on Descartes! Old Prendergast" (Prendergast was the chairman of the P.P.E. examiners that year) "would almost give you an alpha on that alone. . . . Seriously, though, how do you think you've done?"

He just could not tell him the truth. He couldn't tell him, 'I think I've failed; I'm not going on with it.'

"I don't know," he evaded. "I'm not too happy about it."

"Well, well, we shall see," said Wentworth. "Come and see me to-morrow evening; you'll be feeling more cheerful with six papers behind you. Come for a drink at 6.30, and we'll have a post-mortem enlivened with sherry."

They parted, then Wentworth turned back and called: "How's your father? Give him my love when you write. Tell him the most learned and eloquent ink is flowing out of the elephants' backs."

Mahmoud locked his door and sat down on the edge of the settee, his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees. The bottom of his world had fallen out; there seemed to be no ground underneath him. He sat on bottomless, swaying waters, sinking into them, and they swirled around him. The fragments of his world, splintered, twisted incoherences, rose and fell with the waves, in a surrealist dance, horrible and meaningless. Magdalen Tower floated up, with Wentworth sticking out of its middle, speaking to him; then the jasmin bush in their garden at home sprouted from the head of the porter, and Harris was saying, 'I think, therefore I exist,' and the jasmin bush became Polonius riding on an ivory elephant with a nail-file in his mouth. His father, Badriya, Miss Bannerman . . . his mother on her distant, palm-matted bed under the electric fan, swirled up to him in strange vortices of slender gold bracelets, in the middle of which, like the royal head on a coin, spun the pink-and-white face of Mr Raikes. Then the bracelets grew larger and became a still, white circle clasping the bronze of Badriya's thigh, through which still peered, but no longer spinning, the face of Mr Raikes. Both visions fell on a huge, numb



indifference, where neither desire nor jealousy stirred. Even passion now perished in this total annihilation.

Young students failing in their exams did it every year in his country. He used to read about them in the papers, think, 'the poor, stupid little fools' . . . two or three cases after each state exam, sixteen or seventeen years old, ordinary school examinations, secondary certificate, nothing very important, with a second or a third chance . . . pour paraffin on themselves and strike a match, throw themselves under trains. . . .

He started. A low, faint knock had sounded on his door. The handle turned slowly round, and the door gave slightly on its lock under the weight of the push. It was Jim Powell! Mahmoud remained absolutely still. A few seconds passed. The handle, released, swung back; the footsteps moved away.

Was he mad to think of such a thing? . . . For a moment he swayed, as a man might turn in his sleep if somebody calls him, swaying on the edge of consciousness. The soft knock, the turning handle, the retreating footsteps of Pythagoras going down to Hall, glowed with tremendous, supernatural significance, calling him back from the threshold of his dark journey—back to the light outside and the silver glory of Magdalen Tower in the blue sky and the dreamed delights of love . . . and the disgrace of failing in his finals!

The glow faded, the silence fell again, and the voyager, seeing nowhere to turn back to from that threshold, and holding in his hand all that remained of Dr Andrews' little pills, plunged on into the night.

## CHAPTER IX

SHEIKH AHMED was having breakfast with Badriya and Miss Bannerman before going to a business appointment at the Agency. A new waiter, uninformed (as his predecessors had had occasion to become) regarding Islamic taboos on pig meat, had brought him a slice of bacon with his fried eggs, and had it rejected with an impeccable "No, thank you," in English, and suitable friendly imprecations in Arabic. Laughing, Sheikh Ahmed turned to Miss Bannerman.

"Don't these brothers of yours see from the colour of my skin and these, my venerable robes, that I am a true believer and not an infidel?" he asked.

"They're no brothers of mine," she said. "They're all Italians. All the chefs in London hotels are French, and all the waiters Italian."

"May God extirpate all Frenchmen and all Italians!" he said.

After a moment Badriya said, "When does Mahmoud finish his exams?"

"On Tuesday," said Sheikh Ahmed. "He'll be with us again quite soon now—an Oxford B.A.!" Then he asked Miss Bannerman, "They wear a special robe, don't they, Oxford B.A.s?"

"Yes; a long, black robe with a white hood—rabbit fur."

"We'll pose him for a photograph in that when the results are out," he said. "He'll look good in it . . . don't you think so, Badriya?"

"Black doesn't suit black people," she said. "But perhaps the rabbit fur will look nice."

The little cherubic page in green stood at their table as though sprouted from the ground, and said, "Telephone, sir." He knew by now the extent of the English vocabulary possessed by the funny black gentleman who always joked with him, and he addressed him in single words without grammar, but with a permanent smile.

"Thank you," said Sheikh Ahmed with a little upward thrust of his head and the solemn-smiling emphasis he reserved for his English pronouncements, and got up. Then he patted the page affectionately on the shoulder, saying, "Nice boy," and followed him to the telephone.

The speaker awaiting him at the other end was Amin. Wentworth, wanting to communicate with Sheikh Ahmed urgently and needing an interpreter, remembered Mahmoud's friend at Merton, and sent him a message through his porter which reached him in the middle of breakfast and brought him scurrying to Mahmoud's college. He now stood beside Wentworth at the telephone. Sheikh Ahmed was a friend of his father's and knew him well. A few seconds passed in inevitable Arabic greetings, then Amin said:

"I'm speaking from Oxford . . . from the room of Mr Wentworth, Mahmoud's tutor."

"My salutations to him," said Sheikh Ahmed, his enthusiasm still a second ahead of the seriousness that had come into Amin's voice, "give him good morning from me. How is he?" Then his mind jumped in quick alarm, glimpsing a peculiarity in the situation. . . . "Where's Mahmoud?" he asked.

"Mr Wentworth has a message for you. . . . Listen, Uncle Sheikh

Ahmed; don't get worried, but Mahmoud isn't very well. There's been a little mishap, and Mr Wentworth thinks you'd better come to Oxford right away."

"What's happened? An accident? Tell me, at once, is he very ill? Where is he now?"

"He's in hospital."

"But what happened? Was he knocked down by a car?"

"No. Apparently he was taking some tablets to make him sleep, and by mistake he took too many. . . ."

"You mean he is unconscious? . . . Listen, Amin, my son, tell me the truth, don't lie to me: is he dead?"

"No, no. He's alive."

"Swear by the Prophet."

"I swear by the Prophet, he's alive."

"But in danger? Is he in danger?"

"The doctors think there is a good chance."

"Is that true?"

"Yes, upon my honour. But it's better you come at once. I'm sorry I shan't be able to meet you, as I have to go to my exam in half an hour, but Mr Wentworth says he will meet you at the station and go with you to the hospital. He also asks if you can bring with you somebody to interpret. There's a train that leaves for Oxford at 9.45, and if you can catch it, you'll be here at five past eleven."

The only interpreter he could lay his hands on in such a hurry was Miss Bannerman. Her Arabic was not very good, but it would have to do. And that meant that Badriya, too, would have to come, because they could not leave her alone.

Though he did not tell the girls the whole alarming truth, Miss Bannerman sensed it from his manner, and the three of them, alone in a first-class compartment, sat silent and subdued most of the way. His face, which in its normal cheerfulness, carried his sixty-odd years lightly and firmly, with scarcely a wrinkle showing, seemed to have dropped a mask and hung flabbily around the eyes and mouth, mirthless, beaten and very old. A dull, bewildered pain looked out of it.

Wentworth took them to the Radcliffe Infirmary, and the doctor came to see them.

"Will he live?" asked Sheikh Ahmed, hanging on the lips of Miss Bannerman and the doctor, as the message travelled unintelligibly before being decoded to him.

"There is hope," said the doctor. "We've done everything that can be done, and now we must wait . . . and hope."

"Is he still quite unconscious?"

"Yes."

"Can I see him, just for a moment?"

"Certainly, if you wish."

Sheikh Ahmed went alone with the doctor. Mahmoud lay on his back in a deep sleep. There was a nurse beside him, feeling his pulse. Sheikh Ahmed stood on the other side, close to the bed, looking at the sleeping, peaceful face. All his bewilderment since the morning, since the day Mahmoud came to London to see the doctor about his sleeplessness, ended, and there was no doubt in his mind that he was responsible for this.

"Mahmoud!" he said in a low voice, bending over the pillow, "Mahmoud, my son, I am here . . . your father." The face looked so natural in its sleep that he expected the eyes to open. But there was no answer, and at the thought that there might never be an answer again, the old man's fortitude cracked, and he turned away.

"Any change?" the doctor asked the nurse on the other side.

"No. Still very weak."

"What's the pulse-rate now?"

"Thirty-eight."

They went back to the waiting-room where they had left the others.

"How did he come to have all those sleeping tablets?" the doctor asked. "Why was he taking them?"

Sheikh Ahmed explained.

"Worried about his exam, I suppose," said the doctor.

"He had no cause to worry," said Wentworth.

"All the same, it affects them that way sometimes," said the doctor. "Just the tension of it. . . . There was nothing else on his mind, as far as you know?"

"No," said Sheikh Ahmed.

There was no open recognition by any of those present that it might be a case of attempted suicide. That dark suspicion was concealed by the general assumption of an accidental overdose.

Badriya had not spoken at all since their arrival. On the train she had exchanged a few remarks with Miss Bannerman, but nobody had taken any notice of her from the moment they arrived, and she had remained utterly mute. Then it began to happen. Sitting aside, while Sheikh Ahmed, with Miss Bannerman interpreting for him, talked to Wentworth and the doctor, she became angry at her exclusion. It struck her that she was not a servant or a little child, with no concern in what was going on, but a very important person. With a sweet, secret satisfaction, she remembered

how Mahmoud had bought her the two bathing-costumes, and how he had taken her hand in the taxi and said that he loved her. Nobody here knew that. This was her secret, which made her now more important than all these people. Her blood tingled with pleasure at the thought, and then chilled with sudden fear. She stopped thinking and listened again to what the three men were still saying, via Miss Bannerman. Her resentment focused on the Englishwoman—an intruder taking part in the discussion, while she sat aside. . . . But he had not held Miss Bannerman's hand. He had held hers and played with her fingers.

"Let's go now to the hotel," said Sheikh Ahmed at last, "and have some lunch. We will come back immediately after." He had arranged with the doctor to have a message telephoned to the hotel during lunch if there was any change.

"I don't want any lunch," said Badriya proudly. "I want to wait here."

They all looked at her. Sheikh Ahmed stared. Wentworth and the doctor had vaguely assumed she was the old man's daughter. Sheikh Ahmed in his agitation and hurry at the station had not even introduced her to Wentworth. He said:

"Wait here, by yourself?"

"Yes," she said, "I want to wait in his room." Then looking at the doctor, but holding them all with her climax, "Can't I wait in his room? . . . I am his wife."

Sheikh Ahmed was left speechless by her quiet audacity. He had all along taken her passivity for granted, and her sudden, dramatic self-assertion astounded him. The carved, aloof beauty of the young face, faintly edged with resentment, lent a strange dignity to her utterance, and the two Englishmen noticed for the first time how beautiful she was.

Sensing the impression she had made, she added:

"I think he will be glad to see me when he wakes up."

"I don't think you'd better wait actually in the room quite yet," said the doctor cautiously, "but you can certainly be close by, if you wish, and the nurse will call you as soon as there is any improvement." He had been about to say 'if' instead of 'as soon as', but he sacrificed the greater precision of science on the altar of sympathy with this exquisite, youthful wife who had remained meekly in the background till that moment.

She turned to her uncle. "The doctor says I can wait," she told him in Arabic.

"And your lunch?" was all he could say in his amazement and sympathy. He was moved by this gesture of devotion to his son

from the girl whom he had not expected yet to have any feelings as a wife. But he was afraid of Mahmoud, afraid of the effect on him of seeing her there when he came to.

"I'm not hungry," she said.

As though understanding her Arabic, the doctor said, "I can arrange for you to have some lunch here."

"Perhaps," said Sheikh Ahmed timidly, "you'd better come away with us, my girl; we don't know how he'll be feeling when he awakens. Perhaps it wouldn't be good for him to see you at once."

She answered with superb confidence, "I know he will want to see me."

Hoping she was right, wondering how she knew, wondering suddenly as he looked into her eyes what had happened that afternoon when they went out shopping together, he said, "All right then; stay, my daughter. We will come back soon."

At last, when they were at the hotel and just before Wentworth left him, Sheikh Ahmed dared to bring out the question. "And his examination?" he asked. He now permitted himself sufficient hope of his son's life to think of that disaster. In the shadow of death it ceased to count, but whenever the shadow seemed to lift it arose in its place. "Can he take the papers that he missed today, later?"

"I'm afraid not," said Wentworth.

"There's no supplementary exam, then, in separate subjects as they have in other countries?"

"No; we have no such thing at Oxford."

"What then . . . does that mean he has missed it altogether?" He looked at the tutor in horror.

"Well, no; there are two possibilities. . . ." Wentworth had been thinking hard himself on this subject since the morning. Inability to finish the examination on account of sickness was not failure; so that Mahmoud could take Schools again the following year, the whole examination. On the other hand, the examiners might be able to grant him an *ægrotat*. He had done four papers, half the total, and if his performance on them was good enough it might entitle him to an unclassified Honours degree. . . . He explained the position to the father.

"You thought he had a good chance of getting a first class?" Sheikh Ahmed asked.

"Yes, I did."

"But he can't get it now?"

"Only if he stays another year."

Wentworth left them and Sheikh Ahmed, jabbing irritably and not very successfully at a mutton chop, with the Englishwoman silent before him, brooded over his stricken hopes. Then he chid his pride, in fear and submission before God. 'It was written thus . . . I accept it, O God; I am a Muslim and this Thy Will. Let it only not be written that he should die! Let this in Thy mercy not be written!'

The Englishwoman opposite him respected his silence and did not speak. But she looked very sympathetic, and very understanding. After some time he said :

"I want to ask you a question, Miss Bannerman. . . . Do you think Mahmoud will ever be happy with Badriya?"

"Isn't he happy now?" she asked, somewhat taken aback.

"God be my witness, Miss Bannerman, I don't know; I don't know what to think. . . . You do what you think is the best for your son, and then you find it all going wrong."

"Didn't he want this marriage?"

"It had always been understood in our family that he would marry his cousin, and he never showed any objection. But he is different now; his education has made him different. He would have liked his wife to be educated like himself; but where in our country could he have found such a girl?" Then his mind went off at a tangent, and without waiting for Miss Bannerman to answer his first question he said :

"You know, his friend, Amin Shendi, the lad who rang me up this morning, the son of Sheikh Ayyoub Shendi. You know Sheikh Ayyoub, he's got a girl at your school?"

"Yes, I know him."

"He's going to marry an English girl, a girl from the University here."

"Really?"

"Yes. Mahmoud told me. And he is not going back home, he is going to live with her in Paris. I think that is very unkind to his people, who have been waiting for him all these years . . . and very foolish. Such a marriage can come to no good. I don't believe she can be a decent girl."

"Oh, why not?" she said, though in a queer instinctive way she rather agreed with him.

"Why should a decent English girl of a good family want to marry a black man and leave her people?"

"She may love him," she ventured, but finding the idea strange.

"Oh, that kind of love is no good. It is not natural, Miss Ban-

nerman; there are too many differences, too many things against it. The whole world's against it."

No message came during lunch, and as soon as they finished they went back to the infirmary. Badriya was still waiting; she had not been called by the nurse. They saw the matron, and she told them there was no change. He was still unconscious.

"He is in the hands of God," said Sheikh Ahmed, "and we must wait. There is nothing we can do."

After the little relaxation of his talk with Miss Bannerman, he relapsed into patient, silent fortitude—the citadel of the true Muslim and hardened Arab. In him, as in most of his countrymen, the carefree gaiety of the African dwelt side by side with the stoic nobility of Islam and the desert; and the heart that could gambol in delight round all the little joys of life and never missed the mirth of a light moment, steeled instantly into stern endurance when trials came. At such times, the great sustaining reality of his Semite's faith filled him, untroubled by the African impishness which permitted itself light-hearted and almost irreverent jests about it in the careless hours. He sat with the girls, waiting to hear whether his son was going to live or die, his eyes almost defiant in courage, his lips taut, his head held up. The tired, beaten look of the morning had gone.

"Did they bring you a good lunch?" he asked Badriya, feeling a new fondness for her.

"Yes; it was quite enough. I did not want much."

"As soon as there is an improvement, we will go in together, you and I," he said.

Four o'clock came, and five, and there still was no change. At a quarter to six Amin, having finished his examinations for the day, came round to see Sheikh Ahmed and enquire about Mahmoud. He waited with them for a while, then left saying he would enquire again later in the evening. When he had gone Sheikh Ahmed turned to Miss Bannerman and said, "That is the boy who is going to marry the English girl."

"I guessed as much," she said.

"Is Amin Shendi going to marry an English girl?" Badriya asked with a surprised interest.

"Yes," said Sheikh Ahmed, "foolish boy!"

"Why doesn't he marry his cousin, Khalda?" she asked.

"Ask him. I suppose he has become too Frangi for that."

Just then they saw the doctor coming. He smiled as soon as they saw him, and Sheikh Ahmed's heart bounded up like a submerged ball, released.



"Yes," said the doctor, "he's going to be all right. The pulse is nearly back to normal and he is waking up. I think you may go in to see him now."

Badriya was quickly on her feet. The doctor took her and Sheikh Ahmed to the room. Miss Bannerman stayed behind.

At first, Mahmoud opened his eyes dimly, without seeing anything, without knowing where he was. A great limp drowsiness filled him, and in it memory felt feebly for its broken threads . . . stumbled on the snapped tips. Magdalen Tower swam into view. Harris, the porter, wandered in, trailing a red line. Wentworth emerged from staircase 3. The handle of a door swivelled. The soft footsteps of Pythagoras . . . and then the dark! He opened his eyes again, shuddering with a great dread, and saw the light pouring in at the window from the June day, and an indescribably grateful sweetness flooded him, gently, gently, like a golden dream. Out of the darkness he came, gliding voluptuously into sweet, rediscovered life—life so precious and absolute in seeing itself, in feeling the comfort of its limbs between the cool sheets on the soft mattress, in breathing the pleasant smooth air, that nothing else mattered. The horror of his failure was like something that had happened a million years before. It lay behind him, engulfed in the dark from which he had come back, and no shadow from it lay across the caressing sweetness of the moment or the future that flowed from it like a silver stream from the hills of the first morning. Then he dozed again. His consciousness drifted out lazily, pleasantly, on wings of gossamer. But a moment later the wings came back and floated down, folding themselves. He opened his eyes and saw his father, and next to his father he saw Badriya.

"Thank God! Praise be to God!" said Sheikh Ahmed, almost laughing and crying in the agitation of his joy. "How are you feeling now, my son? . . . But why do I ask since you have opened your eyes? Praise be to God."

"I'm all right," said Mahmoud, and his father was not displeased that while he answered him he was looking at the girl.

"Oh, Mahmoud, what a terrible accident that was, my son; what a shock you have given us! How could you make such a mistake?"

Only then, since his awakening, did Mahmoud explicitly admit to himself that he had tried to end his life. He knew his life had nearly ended in that darkness, but the responsibility . . . so they thought it was an accident! Well, thank God, for that too.

"I don't know," he said. "I wanted to sleep desperately. . . ."

Have you been here long? What time is it now? What is today?"

"It's now six o'clock in the evening. We've been here since the morning. Mr Wentworth rang me up and we came right away." He gave him some of the details, mentioned Amin's visit, and then said with a little nervousness but smiling affectionately at Badriya, "When it was time for us to go and have some lunch at the hotel, this naughty girl refused to come; she stayed here and waited."

She lowered her eyes, unconsciously levelling at Mahmoud the semicircle of her long eyelashes; and the urge which came upon him brought swift, cunning inspiration. Looking round the room and seeing that the nurse had gone out, he said:

"And where's Miss Bannerman? Is she waiting outside? Why don't you call her in?"

"Of course," said Sheikh Ahmed, "I'll call her." And he walked out, leaving them alone. Badriya remained standing at the bottom of the bed, her eyes still lowered.

"Come here," said Mahmoud softly. "Quick, before they come back."

She looked up, as though uncertain whether to be pleased or angry, her face exquisite in the uncertainty.

"Come," he said again, pleadingly.

She came slowly, still uncertain. When she was within reach, he lifted his arm and took her hand.

"Sit down on the bed for a moment. Why are you looking like that?"

"Like what?"

"Angry," he said.

"Who told you I am angry?" She sat down on the edge of the bed and he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it with a passionate gentleness, on the outside, then the inside, then along the curves of the fingers and on the tips. Then, looking up into her eyes, and finding that his dream of the sweetness of life had been far, far paler than the truth, he said:

"I hope my father doesn't find Miss Bannerman very quickly. . . . Is it a long way with many turnings to where she's sitting?"

"You don't want to see her?" she asked simply, with transparent relief, without subtlety, without seeing the humour of his question.

"No," he said, pleased at her sulk but a little disappointed that she had not laughed at his question. "I wanted to get my father out of the room."

He kissed her hand again, her wrist, just above the bracelets. He longed to raise himself and kiss her lips and the smooth oval curve

of her cheek, but he was too weak to make the effort and too shy to ask her to bring her lips to the level of his.

"I'm glad you're better," she said, looking at him for a moment, then dropping her eyes again while he took her hand and pressed it on his cheek, so that the softness of her palm cupped him between the chin and the ear. She giggled with quick, childish amusement, and said, "You've got a beard!"

"I haven't shaved today," he said, amused, but recalled somewhat shamefacedly from his more adult, tense feelings.

"It pricks like a brush," she said, stroking it experimentally, and just then they heard the unmistakable brisk resonance of Sheikh Ahmed's steps coming back. He released her hand and she got up. But when his father and the Englishwoman entered, he saw how pleased with herself Badriya looked, and the joy inside him brightened with the glow of the young lover when he meets the world again after his first timid adventure of the lips.

Mahmoud stayed in hospital that night, and his father with the two girls went back to the hotel.

While they were sitting in the lounge of the Randolph after dinner, Amin walked in accompanied by Betty Corfield. They had had dinner together, and she had insisted on coming with him when he told her where he was going. He had been shy of taking her, but she was fascinated by the idea of meeting people from his country, not completely Westernised products like him and Mahmoud, but the genuine, native article, the real 'natives' of the colonial dictionary, of which she knew Mahmoud's father would be one; and a young female specimen!

"But I thought your women never went out," she had said. "You mean to say this girl is staying with her father-in-law at the Randolph? What does she wear? Is she veiled?"

"She wears a sort of scarf around her head, but she isn't veiled; and she's been staying at the Savoy as well as the Randolph!" he chuckled . . . "And my, she's stunning!"

"H'm, I thought you were looking dazed over dinner. . . . Are you making fun of her or is she really good-looking?"

"Now, now . . . *pas de jalousie*," he said. "She is a respectable married woman and I am not interested. I was merely stating a very striking fact—a fact I probably should not have been permitted to observe at home."

"But isn't it extraordinary that she should have come to England?"

"Unique," he said. "As far as I know, she's the first girl from our country to have been seen north of the Mediterranean. . . .

Mahmoud's father is one of our elderly progressives, but it remains to be seen whether he intends to keep it up to this extent in the old country."

"But this is wonderful! I must see her at once. You see that things are changing in your country. Long live the Revolution!"

"*Viens, donc,*" he said. "*Allons.*" A pride stronger than his shyness excited him. He was proud of Betty. Proud of marrying an educated girl, an English girl enlightened and brave enough not to shrink from marrying a man with a black skin. This would be his first opportunity of showing her off to people from home, people who when they heard he was marrying an English girl would probably think he had picked up some barmaid. . . . Let them see!

Though he only introduced her as 'Miss Corfield', the three of them guessed at once that this was the girl he was going to marry, and they all felt a slight embarrassment—the embarrassment of facing a somewhat unnatural situation. Betty sat between Badriya and Miss Bannerman, and Amin next to Sheikh Ahmed. Sheikh Ahmed had told him at once the good news about Mahmoud; and the congratulations and rejoicings that followed eased the tension and set things moving on a pleasant course. Amin spoke so generously of Mahmoud, of his great abilities and reputation at Oxford, of the inevitability of the First he would have got but for this tragic mishap, that Sheikh Ahmed warmed to him more and more, and though he still disapproved of his matrimonial intentions, the disapproval became very subdued. Moreover, as they both had the same gay disposition, and as the old man's gaiety was now more than usually released by Mahmoud's recovery, the two were soon chattering away merrily in Arabic, recalling funny incidents and people at home, exchanging hearty pleasantries.

Betty was thrilled. She thought Sheikh Ahmed's clothes—the pale blue inside robe, belted in striped black and silver folds round the portly equator, the purple outside cloak, the snow-white impeccably layered turban—the most beautiful costume she had ever seen; and she liked the old man immensely, his obvious genuineness, his geniality, his laughter. She was also fascinated by Badriya, and intrigued to get a glimpse of the mind that lay apparently so remote and indifferent behind that strange, static loveliness. . . . No, not that of a picture or a statue, but of something moulded and kneaded out of a smooth exquisite clay that had then become alive. She spoke to Miss Bannerman for some time, asking her about the country and her life in it; and Badriya watched her, as much fascinated on her own plane as Betty was on hers.

Into that mind about whose quality Betty was speculating there drifted, vaguely, the thought that Mahmoud might have done what Amin Shendi was going to do, that this green-eyed, white-skinned English girl could have been Mahmoud's wife, able to talk to him cleverly, as she was talking to Miss Bannerman. Why had Mahmoud married her instead of marrying a girl like that? . . . Perhaps he was more afraid of his father than Amin was of his, because surely, if Amin had found an English girl to marry him, Mahmoud could have found one too. . . . But it was strange; if she had been an English girl, she would never have wanted to marry a man with a black skin. . . . They were funny, these English girls.

She was startled when the strange English girl who was going to do that, turned to her and with a smile in the green flash of her eyes said:

"Aren't you thrilled to be the first girl from your country to travel so far? Amin was telling me that no girl from your country had been to England before."

Badriya turned to her teacher.

"What is 'thrilled'?" she asked, unsure whether it meant 'afraid' or something nice.

"Oh, excited, happy with excitement," explained Miss Bannerman.

"Yes," said Badriya, "I am thrilled."

"Tell me, what is the most exciting thing you have done in England since you came?" went on Betty, exploring.

"I have ridden a bicycle. It was very exciting."

"How absolutely splendid," said Betty, and the three girls laughed together. . . . "And will you go on riding a bicycle when you go back home now that you've learned?"

"Perhaps in our garden, sometimes, but not outside."

While this conversation was going on, Sheikh Ahmed suddenly asked Amin in a confidential aside, "Is this the girl you're going to marry?"

"Yes, Uncle Sheikh Ahmed."

"She seems to be a very nice young lady," said the old man, impressed with Betty's appearance and manner; "and is she of a good family? What does her father do?"

"He writes books; her mother is dead." And then to stagger Sheikh Ahmed with a prestige-analogy which he would readily understand (for he feared that the writing of books had somehow misfired, there being many insignificant scribblers in the literary world Sheikh Ahmed knew), he did not scruple to make use of Uncle Leopold, Betty's *bête noire* Colonel Blimp. He said:

"Her uncle was private secretary to the Viceroy of India at one time—Lord Curzon." Actually Uncle Leopold had been Deputy-Assistant once for a period of six weeks, but his conscience permitted him to stretch a point.

"So, by God!" said Sheikh Ahmed, struggling in some awe with the conception of Amin as the nephew-in-law of Mr Charlton at the vice-regal palace he knew. "There cannot then be anything against her, my son; but I do not approve of your leaving your people and country, as Mahmoud tells me you mean to do. It is not right. What does your father say about it?"

"I have only just written to tell him. I haven't heard yet."

"It will be a great blow to him."

"But what am I to do, Uncle Sheikh Ahmed? How can I take her home? . . . You know . . ." He looked humble and shame-faced.

"I don't know, my son. It is a very difficult matter. May God guide you to what is best; I am sure I don't know. But she is a nice, good-looking girl. . . . Which Viceroy did you say her uncle was private secretary to?"

Though Betty's exploration of Badriya's mind failed to discover any startling springs, she continued to find her, the mere fact of her and of her presence in England, very enchanting. And she felt that through this girl and her father-in-law she was, in a new and exciting way, nearer to Amin than before, touching a part of him which she had not known, which could not exist actively in him when he was with her. An idea she had had vaguely since she came crystallised into decision, and she turned to Jean Bannerman.

"Are you staying here tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yes; we shall be here for a few days, I believe."

"I'd very much like to have a little chat with you alone, if I may. Could you have lunch with me tomorrow?"

"That would be lovely. Thank you very much."

"Thank you. One o'clock at the Mitre. Is that all right?"

"I'll be there."

Amin had been talking with Sheikh Ahmed all this time on the subject of proconsuls, and did not hear this tryst-making exchange. From Curzon they had moved to Cromer, in whose praise Sheikh Ahmed had much to say.

When they left, he asked Betty if they would be lunching together again the next day, as they had done every day since the beginning of their examinations, at a restaurant near the Examination Schools, then going for a stroll in the Botanical Gardens before the afternoon paper.

"No," she said, "I have a date."

"A date? With whom?"

"Now, now, *pas de jalousie*," she said. "That's my own little secret. I may tell you about it later, if you don't try to spy on me."

"That means that I shall not even get a gamma on my after-noon paper," he said disconsolately.

"Who cares?" she said. "Your pictures are not bad."

Like him, she had come to regard his painting as of more importance than his university studies. Of course, he should get a degree because he would need to get a job, but she knew now that the power and joy of creation which lay behind his boyish irresponsibility could only come out of him in the making of pictures, as she had seen him making them, as he had been making them since, amazingly, the desire to paint had come upon him by accident two years before, when he went to Paris in his summer vacation and shared a room with a Moroccan art student, and came back with half his clothes left behind and his suitcases crammed with canvasses and brushes and tubes of paint.

Badriya stood for a long time before the looking-glass that night, and beside her own image her mind placed that of Betty Corfield. She gazed at herself and at the white girl with the green fire in her eyes. Then she began to undress, still in front of the mirror, and she remembered with disappointment that her bathing-costumes had been left behind at the Savoy. She would have liked to put them on tonight; and as there were two of them, she could have put one on herself and lent the other to the white girl, and then changed round. . . . She did not think white and yellow would look very nice on a white body, but she knew they looked nice on her, and he had said, "But your skin isn't black; it's a very lovely brown." She looked at her long, shapely limbs in the glass, then she giggled to herself, and her teeth flashed their flawless whiteness, whiter than milk in the dark face, like the whiteness of the bathing-suit on her body. And with her left hand she took her right tenderly and raised it to her lips and kissed it on the outside and the inside, on the curves of the fingers and the tips, and on the wrist. Then, noticing a little discrepancy in the last action, she brought up the bracelets, which had slid down to her elbow, and kissed the wrist again just above them. Then she giggled again and went to bed.

"It's so nice of you to come," said Betty, hurrying into the Mitre five minutes late, with her cap and gown under her arm

and finding Jean Bannerman waiting for her. "Please forgive me for being late." She was flushed and the green of her eyes shone brighter in the glow.

"You're still doing Schools? I thought you had finished."

"We finish this afternoon, thank God."

"I hope you did well this morning."

"I don't know. I never know. I hope it wasn't as bad as it seemed to me. I often stop half-way and think to myself, 'God, what tripe I'm writing!' Anyhow, it's all done now, except for one paper, and perhaps it isn't as bad as all that." She laughed excitedly, still breathless from her hurry, and led Jean to the table she had booked.

"It makes me feel so old to see somebody taking Schools," said Jean, taking to Betty more than she had done the evening before.

"When did you go down?"

"Four years ago."

"Good gracious! I don't propose to feel old in four years' time whatever I see people doing."

"I do feel old, though," said Jean, with a touch of wistfulness.

"I suppose it's going abroad . . . and teaching!"

"Well, let's drink to a distinguished old age for both of us. What will you have?"

They had a drink and Betty ordered lunch; then when the waiter had gone she turned to Jean.

"Did you know I was getting married?" she asked.

"Yes, I knew." Jean had half guessed what Betty wanted to talk to her about.

"Are you shocked?" Betty always liked to take the bull by the horns. If she felt the ice was thin, she liked to take a hammer and crack it instead of skating gingerly.

Jean felt her embarrassment evaporate.

"No," she said, "not shocked, but——"

"A little surprised? You find it a strange thing to happen; well, that's quite natural. I don't mind. I was surprised myself at first, though the colour of the human skin doesn't worry me in the least. Nor does a backward environment. But he's scared stiff of taking me to his country. He wants us to stay away, to go and live in Paris, and I think it's wrong, though Paris in one way would be very good for him, for his painting. Did you know he painted? Did Mahmoud tell you?"

"No, I didn't know."

"It's really very promising . . . but I don't want to take him away from his people, and I should really like to go and live with him



among them. He says it's impossible, but I don't see why it should be. . . . What do you think?"

Betty's earnest sincerity, courage and decency, glowing in her face with the sherry, made a most agreeable impression on Jean. She said:

"I think it's wonderful of you, and I should hate to damp your enthusiasm, but it wouldn't be easy, you know."

"As far as I'm concerned, I can't see any difficulty. I shouldn't mind the snobbery of the British, or what they thought of me, in the least. I shouldn't want to belong to them, anyhow. And I shouldn't mind his people being what we call backward. . . . But is there anything else? What I should like to know is whether you think his own position would be impossible; that's all that matters to me. Would his people refuse to see me, or make his life unbearable on my account?"

"Goodness, no! I shouldn't imagine that for a moment. They are friendly, kindly people; and though many of them dislike us politically as 'British', they are personally charming to any English man or woman who is decent to them. I have many friends among them; they invite me to their houses."

"What else can there be? Do you think the Government, my respected kinsmen, would go out of their way to make things unpleasant for him—apart, that is to say, from refusing to leave their cards or cutting me in the street?"

"No, I don't think they would at all—I mean, officially—make difficulties for him. Personally, of course, they differ a great deal. Some of them will be very objectionable, but you will be surprised how enlightened others are—not at all the old high-and-mighty type. . . . The Chief Secretary, for instance, the man next to the Governor-General, is a most charming and human person, and very pro-native in his policy. Many of the stiffs call him 'the mad Bolshevik', and he doesn't always find it easy to win enough support for his views. . . . It wouldn't surprise me in the least if he were to drop his card or invite you to dinner. He likes shocking the stiffs."

"Don't make it sound so tame," said Betty. "I shouldn't mind a fight."

"But he isn't tame. He's very exciting and great fun; you'd like him. . . . But you wouldn't like the Governor of the province, or the director of agriculture, or the chief physician. . . ." She paused for the next contingent of stiffs to come up in her mental review.

→ . . . "Or Mrs Beresford-Jones, better known as Lady Jupiter."

"Oh, how delicious! Who calls her that?"

"The Chief Secretary—at least all the naughty mortals do now, but somebody told me he did the christening." Face to face, the two girls chuckled heartily.

"Oh, I must meet him. That settles it. No Paris for me! I must meet your Chief Secretary and Lady Jupiter!"

## CHAPTER X

SHEIKH AHMED put the alternatives presented by Wentworth before Mahmoud. They were alone, with Badriya, in the hotel after lunch.

"Your tutor says there is a hope of getting you an Honours degree on the strength of the four papers you did, but there will be no distinction of class in it. On the other hand, you could stay another year and take the examination again. I have no objection to that, if the Education Department can be persuaded to wait for you till then. What do you say? Perhaps you'd like to think it over and discuss it with Mr Wentworth."

"Yes. I must see him." It was amazing, but he seemed to have lost all interest in his degree. He felt no pang of defeated ambition. All that belonged to a past existence which had ended in that darkness. The sweet, intoxicating sense of floating up on a new wave of life still filled him, sitting there in the comfortable lounge, drinking a second cup of coffee, incredibly aware of the benediction of living. His whole life had gone into another groove. And he could not switch it back to that of college existence. He had finished with Oxford. Even if he didn't get an *agrotat*, if he had to go without a degree at all, he would not stay a fourth year.

"Of course," said his father, following his own train of thought, "if you don't get a degree on this year's examination, you must stay a fourth year."

"I'm not sure that would be necessary."

"How, not necessary? Leave Oxford without a degree!" There was horror in the old man's voice.

"Why not? I don't set much store by it. I have had my education, and that's all that matters—not the degree."

"But . . . but the Education Department wouldn't have you without a degree. What do you mean, Mahmoud? Don't talk nonsense, my son. What about your career?"

"There are other careers. And, anyhow, it was my idea to begin as a teacher. You weren't very keen on it at first; you wanted me to go straight into the Administration."

"But even the Administration won't have you without a degree today, not in a post worthy of you. . . . Are you going to begin as a clerk?"

"I think I should like to come and work on your farm." This idea had often occurred to him. The state of the people working on his father's farm and living in the villages around was shocking. He had spent a few days there during his last vacation, and been appalled at their ignorance and squalor; he thought of the things he could do for them if he was in charge—adult education, a clinic, a small school for the children.

"Come back with your brains and an Oxford education just to be a farmer!" said Sheikh Ahmed bitterly. "Of course, I always hoped you'd take an interest in the farm and continue to supervise it after me, but that's not a career for you, Mahmoud. You can do that from the town, in your spare time. . . . The Government must be your career—Administration, the Ministries!" He shrank from the sight of this shaking edifice of hopes. Then the main fundamental horror struck him again. "And, anyhow," he said falteringly, "whatever you do, don't you want something to show for your education? What will people say if you go back without a degree?" He thought of the cable he was going to have sent to the newspapers at home when Mahmoud's result came out, of the nice little paragraphs that would have appeared, and which he had often phrased himself for the editors. . . . "It gives us great pleasure to announce to our readers . . . the first student from this country . . . the highest honours obtainable at Oxford University . . .", of the cables of congratulation he would receive. To have all that cancelled, and instead, people saying that Sheikh Ahmed's son had not been given so much as a slip of paper to say that he had passed! Education in their country meant a certificate. No certificate, nothing! For ten years abroad and three thousand pounds!

"I'll talk it over with Mr Wentworth," said Mahmoud; "there's plenty of time."

Badriya, who had not been listening to this argument, said:

"This hotel is not nearly as posh as the Savoy." She had learned the word 'posh' from Miss Bannerman that morning, and as at the Savoy she had sat studying the people and the furniture.

Miss Bannerman came back and announced with enthusiasm that Betty Corfield was a splendid girl. She also announced that Betty had suggested that when she and Amin were through with their afternoon's work they might all take a punt and go out on the river.

Mahmoud turned at once to Badriya. "Would you like to? . . . It's even nicer than Richmond here."

She said, "Yes, let us go."

Sheikh Ahmed declined. He said he would stay behind and write some letters, but insisted the others should go. He thought the young people would enjoy themselves better without him, and that the sport was not appropriate to his dignity or his robes.

Badriya changed into a new frock, a simple yellow linen dress with white bands round the short sleeves, white buttons, a white leather belt and a neat white edged pocket curving gently with the swell of her left breast. Mahmoud saw her coming down the stairs and caught his breath at the cool grace of her figure in the cool linen.

"This is a very pretty dress," he said. "I haven't seen it before."

"What have you seen of her dresses?" said his father proudly, and very pleased at these multiplying signs of his son's interest in his wife.

The punt carrying the five of them swung away gently from the bank. Mahmoud sat with Badriya at one end and the two English girls facing them on the other seat. Amin punted. "I'm really good at this," he said. "There is a special art in it, and once you've mastered it you're safe from a ducking. You shall note the skill with which I steer you in perilous waters." He dipped in the pole and pushed with an expert air.

"Look out!" shouted Mahmoud. A punt, with two girls in it fumbling with paddles, had slanted suddenly across their bows. Amin, recognising the two clumsy paddlers from a previous encounter, deftly avoided the collision. "Till we meet again," he called after them, waving them away with a smile of kindly tolerance. Mahmoud and the two English girls laughed. The punt slid on softly through the sheets of cool, clear water, in and out of the willow shadows, breaking up the mirrored foliage near the banks.

"Do you go out much on the Nile?" asked Betty.

"The British do," said Mahmoud, "a good deal, mostly sailing, some in motor-boats, but it's too deep for punting; and we natives, I am afraid, only go in for utilitarian transport."

"Change places with me," said Badriya to Mahmoud, "I want to sit on that side."

"Why?" he asked.

"I want to dip my hand in the water and I've got bracelets on this one."

"Come on then . . . steady!" He helped her round to his seat.  
"There now; dip it."

"Oh, it's nice," she said, letting her hand in so that the water clasped it a little under the elbow. "It's so cool."

"A land of waters green and clear;  
Of willows and of poplars tall;  
And in the springtime of the year  
The white may breaking over all,"

chanted Amin from the stern.

"What's that?" asked Jean Bannerman.

"A poem by Andrew Lang, I believe," said Betty. "He's always quoting—knows the whole *Golden Treasury* and half Shakespeare by heart. Do all Arabs have such memories?"

Jean said, "They do. . . . You all have to know the Koran by heart, don't you?"

Mahmoud laughed. "Well, not all, fortunately," he said, "only the sheikhs—the religious sheikhs."

"But it isn't as long as the Bible?" asked Betty, horrified.

"No, no," Mahmoud comforted her, "nothing like; only about a third, I think."

"And summer rides by marsh and wold,"

continued Amin, sweeping the banks with a gesture of his hand,

"And autumn with her crimson pall  
About the towers of Magdalen rolled."

"Well, we shan't be here to see that this year," said Mahmoud.

"The only thing I miss out there," said Jean, "is the seasons; there are really no seasons at all, are there, apart from the rains?"

"Or as somebody once said," put in Amin, "only two seasons: the hot season and the very hot season." Mahmoud and the two English girls laughed, and Badriya smiled faintly, looking at them.

"Who said that?" asked Mahmoud, noticing that Badriya had not seen the joke.

"Sir William Carter."

"Oh, the Chief Secretary," said Jean to Betty. "The man I told you about."

"How heavenly," said Betty. "Hot and very hot! I'd just love that; instead of cold and very cold, rain and more rain!"

As the punt glided and the talk and laughter went on among the four of them, with Badriya taking no part, Mahmoud began to feel her loneliness, and a loving pity for her welled up in him. She was reclining beside him, so lovely and quiet in her solitary ignorance, while the four of them, all on the same level, talked in their facile, smart Oxford idiom, which was beyond her, about things she did not know and made jokes which she did not see. He and the two English girls spoke to her from time to time, tried to say simple things which would draw her in, but it was an effort, and they quickly, naturally, reverted to their own level.

Suddenly Badriya said, "Can I put my foot in the water?" A moment before she had seen a girl in another punt with her foot dangling over the edge.

"Of course," said Mahmoud.

"The two?" she laughed.

"The two, if you like."

"What a sensible idea," said Betty. "I think I'll give mine a ducking too. They're feeling beastly hot." Not wearing any stockings, she kicked her shoes off and put her feet in the water.

With a shy thrill Mahmoud saw Badriya take off her shoes and stockings and lift her legs over the side. Her feet had the same lovely grace as her hands. The pink nails pointed the brown toes with startling delicacy. She dipped them in, gave a little cry and brought them out, then slowly slipped them in again and left them paddling. Her dress slipped back a little over her knees, but it did not worry her. She looked very happy doing that. Did she, he wondered, know the facts of life? Did she feel them? In conventional propriety he should wait until they were back home, and the 'night of entry' could be celebrated in the traditional manner. But he didn't want it that way. It was horrible, he had always thought, that traditional manner—the crude, almost sadistic publicity of it, making the bride feel as though she was going to be raped, sending the bridegroom in to her to unwind forcibly the long calico sheet in which she was swathed—forcibly and against her screams, for if she did not scream she would be considered as little better than a harlot! They probably would have to go through with that ceremony. The women, who ruled the family in these matters, would insist on it. But it would not matter if it wasn't the first time. He wanted the first time to be different, to be private. Once they were back in his country that would be impossible; and in three or four weeks they would be leaving England. . . . His heart began to throb at the thought that that night

they would be sleeping in adjacent rooms in the hotel for the first time.

"The art of punting," Amin expounded from the back, "consists in slipping the pole in like this, and then beginning to push away immediately. . . ." He gave a few expert demonstrations. . . . "What you must never do is to hold on too long. . . ."

"Look out," cried Betty, seeing another apparently uncontrollable craft bearing down on them. Amin looked round startled, and the punt stretching him away from the pole sailed on without him. He clung to the pole for a moment, erect and ridiculous in his sudden isolation, then toppled in.

Mahmoud jumped up, the girls laughed and shouted, various neighbouring craft converged, and amidst much hilarity and confusion Amin was fished out, none the worse for his immersion. Badriya was delighted, laughing, talking and gesticulating in the thick of the fun with the others.

"Look at him," she cried, as Amin climbed on board, "see his clothes. . . ." And words failing her she dissolved into laughter.

The incident had put her on a level with the others in a common experience; and Mahmoud, seeing her enjoyment and that she was now one of them, was pleased and touched. In the childish fun of the moment, he became intimate with her, exchanging the happy looks and laughs of complete equality.

Mahmoud offered to relieve him at the pole, but Amin insisted on resuming his command, saying his clothes would dry best in the breeze on the bridge. "'Nothing of him that doth fade'," he said, picking up the pole again, "'but doth suffer a sea change into something rich and strange'." But that again was something Badriya did not understand, though she laughed heartily with the others because he looked so comic, almost transparent through the clinging clothes.

When they went back to the hotel, Badriya was the first to give Sheikh Ahmed the news of what had happened on the river.

"Amin Shendi fell from the boat into the water," she said, "and Mahmoud and some other people pulled him out, and he came out looking like a chicken after a rainstorm, and we laughed so much at him."

It was the longest, most animated speech Mahmoud had heard her make, and the gaiety of it was very moving. He wanted to have her alone, to get her away from the others, because a tenderness was rising in him, urgent for communication. When they were having dinner, he said, addressing the company in general with the crude cunning of love:

"Would you like to go to the pictures this evening; I believe there's a good film at the Electra?"

He knew his father rarely went to the pictures at home, and only if there was an Arabic film, which he could understand and which was vouched for as being respectable enough for a man of his position to see. That only left Miss Bannerman, but if the stars were friendly, she might not want to come—letters to write, or a headache, or just a little kindly tact.

"Yes, let us go," said Badriya eagerly. She had only been to the cinema a few times in her life, once with the school to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and still regarded it as a dazzling treat.

"You go," said Sheikh Ahmed. "What would I be doing, going to see a film in English, even if it was your Joan Caraford, or whatever you call her."

"But we shouldn't like to leave you alone again after dinner," said Mahmoud, half in hypocrisy, half in cunning. The cunning succeeded.

"I'll stay and keep him company," said Jean Bannerman. "I don't feel like coming. You two go alone."

"Sure you don't mind?" he said with grateful alacrity, closing the subject. His excitement had a deeper cause than the prospect of being alone with Badriya at the pictures and on the way. There was a wild hope in him that both his father and the Englishwoman would have gone to bed by the time they returned, and that he would be able to go with Badriya into her room.

Badriya put on her light beige coat, and they walked out of the hotel and turned into the Cornmarket.

After a moment he said, "You enjoyed this afternoon?"—conveying his pleasure in her enjoyment, his wish for it.

"Yes; I enjoyed it. It was very amusing."

"When we're in company, and I have to talk to the others for a bit," he said, "you must not mind it."

"No, I don't mind it; though I don't understand what you and the others say; not all of it."

"Never mind. You're much younger than we are, and you haven't finished your education yet. Don't let that worry you, or think that I don't love you. Even when I am talking to the others, I think of you." He reached out for her hand and pressed it, keeping it in his as they walked. It was soft and warm, but still entirely passive.

"Did you want my father and Miss Bannerman to come with us tonight?" he ventured.



She did not answer immediately, and he sensed with delight her shyness in the silence, and a moment later when she said quietly:

"No, I did not want them to come."

"Nor did I. . . . It's nice to be by ourselves. We must start the swimming lessons soon, and go for bicycle rides. Did you try on the costumes that night?"

She laughed. "I put them on every night in London."

"And filled the bath?"

"No, I did not want to wet them. I swam on my bed."

He gave a loud, happy laugh. "That's very sweet," he said. "You swim on your bed in a costume, and Amin Shendi goes into the river in his clothes!" The simple, clear humour went straight to her heart, and brought back long, lovely ripples of delighted laughter. He was so pleased to have said something witty and easy enough for her to understand.

The film, fortunately, was not a Joan Crawford; it was a Laurel and Hardy—Laurel and Hardy moving furniture and fooling about in the laboratory of a scientist who had discovered the secret of rejuvenation. . . . Laurel tipping the whole bottle of the magic fluid into a cistern of water, then tumbling in after it and emerging a few minutes later after a volcanic eruption of bubbles and fumes, as an ape, still wearing his bowler hat.

Badriya, without understanding much of the meaning, was in hysterics of delight at the funny men and the things they did. Occasionally she asked a question, but generally she was too busy laughing to bother about the things she did not understand.

She was still giggling on the way back.

"It was very funny when he became a monkey," she said. "But how did they do it?"

With a little pain in his heart at the simplicity of the question, he said, "Oh, they just put a monkey in his place with the hat on and take a picture of that." He had been thinking that she might ask him the meaning of the transformation and that he would have to tell her something about evolution, but all that had worried her was the conjuring trick! Impulsively, he took her hand again and put his fingers through hers. "I am so glad you liked it," he said. Then they were both silent as they walked through the thinning streets. It was nearly eleven.

The excitement he had felt earlier in the evening, when he had thought of the adjacent rooms, had ebbed out of him completely. A passionate tenderness, stronger than passion, had killed it. His father and Miss Bannerman had gone to bed when they returned,

but no wild throbbing started in his heart. When she opened the door of her bedroom, he said, "I haven't seen your room; what is it like?" and followed her in, shutting the door behind him. He looked round the room for a moment, saying what a nice dressing-table she had and how thick the curtains were; then he turned round and saw her standing quietly and looking down. He put his arms gently on her shoulders, kissed her lightly on both cheeks, then went out.

"What was the film like; what did you see?" Miss Bannerman asked them at breakfast next morning.

"Very funny," said Badriya. "Two very funny men; a big fat man and a thin man with a face like that"—giving a very passable rendering of the expression—"and they did such funny things. I never laughed so much."

"Oh, Laurel and Hardy!"

"And the thin man fell into a tub and became a monkey!"

"Yes," said Mahmoud. "Have you seen it?"

"No, how does he become a monkey?"

"It's a lovely idea," he said. "He becomes racially rejuvenated a million years in a scientist's tub, having tipped into it the whole bottle of a potent rejuvenator; a few drops of it merely rejuvenate a duck into an egg."

"Oh yes, the duck too!" said Badriya, laughing, and while she laughed at the duck, the egg and the monkey, Mahmoud shared with the Englishwoman the intellectual delight of the idea. For a moment he thought of trying to explain it to Badriya, but he was afraid that even then she would not understand it. Better leave it like that, leave her just touchingly unaware, enjoying it on her own plane, than expose her inability to see what they saw or force from her a pretence of understanding. He wasn't sure that the sympathy of intellectual equality with the Englishwoman gave him more satisfaction than the poignant protectiveness he felt for his child-wife.

Sheikh Ahmed, joining them at this moment, and lifting a connoisseur's eyebrow, asked, "Well, whom did you see yesterday; Joan Caraford or Greta Garbo?"—neither of whom he had ever seen, but whose reputations were well known to him. . . .

Mahmoud saw Wentworth that morning, and on his advice applied for an *agrotat*. As the result could not be known for some time and there was nothing else to detain them at Oxford, they left that afternoon.

## CHAPTER XI

MR RAIKES was not one of those Englishmen whose empire-building qualities in lonely outposts had so impressed Sheikh Ahmed. No imperial fervour, discipline or prestige could compete in his heart with the attraction of a pretty girl's face; and his self-control, during his five years' service in Sheikh Ahmed's country, had succumbed more than once. It had succumbed in the capital to the allurements of the newly established cabaret in a manner which became incompatible with his official position; and in the provincial town to which he was then transferred there had been a little incident with the daughter of the Greek grocer. It so happened that just then a vacancy had occurred at the Government's agency in London, and simultaneously the thought occurred to the Chief Secretary that Mr Raikes might be profitably transferred for a couple of years to the safer distance and greater matrimonial opportunities of England. But Mr Raikes was not the marrying type, and a whole year had passed since his coming back without any final fixing of his affections. They were still, when he had called on Sheikh Ahmed at the Savoy and seen Badriya, entirely free and, as always, on the alert for any passing gratification. The loveliness of the old man's niece had not been slow to gratify his eyes, and the usual quick, irresponsible impulses had come into play—the invitation to his people's place in Kent, the offer to take her out riding. To do him justice, Mr Raikes did not know that the girl was only fifteen, nor that she was married to her cousin. And it is also doubtful whether he would have had any impulses at all had he been completely sober when he first saw her. The sanctity and seclusion of women in her country, the respect due to her uncle from him as a Government official, the fear of tampering with his last chance in the Service, might have constituted even in him a complete inhibition. But none of these barriers seemed to have solidity after his three or four whiskies. And they were not in her country, they were in England, at the Savoy! What harm was there in his paying her a few attentions?

Sobriety, the next morning's light and the atmosphere of the Agency in Eaton Square, however, spread their chill on these sentiments of night and alcohol. The days passed and he did not renew his invitation. Then one morning, Sheikh Ahmed came to the Agency.

It was after their return from Oxford. Sheikh Ahmed wanted to conclude his business in London and then leave for their promised country holiday. He came to the Agency partly on business and partly to ask his friends there about suitable places in the country to go to. And while he was with the agent, Mr Raikes came in and Mr Raikes' heart gave a little jump of pleasure.

"What would be a good place in the country for Sheikh Ahmed and his party to have a little holiday at, Raikes? I have suggested the Cotswolds and Devon. Perhaps the Lakes, too. They want to tour about a bit."

"Why not start with the home counties?" said Mr Raikes. "As a matter of fact, there's a perfect little place I know near where I live in Kent; a first-class hotel with a fine view of the river and a splendid golf-course. . . ." Mr Raikes realised immediately that the ardour of his salesmanship had outrun its discernment, and was not unprepared for the agent's sarcasm when the latter said:

"I don't think the last-named amenity would offer any special attraction to our friend . . . or the trout fishing."

However, Sheikh Ahmed liked the idea. Mr Raikes said that during the week-end he and his car would be at their disposal for a little exploration of the country around, and insisted that they must visit his people. Sheikh Ahmed knew that Mr Raikes' father was a baronet, and had gathered that his 'little place' in Kent was a mansion of some historic pretensions, where he could see how the English nobility (since the line between baronet and baron was not very clear to him) lived in their traditional surroundings.

When Mahmoud knew of what his father had arranged, a forgotten snake of jealousy suddenly uncoiled in his heart. Nettled by the re-emergence of that blond Englishman and his blandishments when he believed that he had seen the last of him, he said, "Oh yes," and was quiet for a moment.

"Oh, that would be nice," said Badriya. "We could go out riding at his place; he said they have horses."

"But you haven't got any riding clothes here," said Mahmoud. His voice betokened a resistance of feeling rather than one of fact. "We can buy her a kit," said Sheikh Ahmed.

He was quiet again, sullenly. He thought of other objections to make; there were more exciting places in England than a quiet spot in Kent; they wouldn't have time to visit all the places they wanted to see if they went to this place. . . . But he began to feel ashamed of himself for feeling so absurdly, unwarrantably jealous. Was he going to behave like an old-fashioned Oriental husband, resent her looking on men or men admiring her—even

this fair, blue-eyed Englishman? Didn't he, with all his education and Western outlook, desire a modern marriage, an emancipated wife? . . . With these thoughts he charmed the snake into a sleepy hole, and that afternoon they went out and bought a riding kit for Badriya.

"You didn't sound very pleased when I told you about this place," said his father. "Was there any reason? Didn't you want to go there?"

"Oh no. I think it'll be very nice," he said, and the snake gave a little hiss which he tried not to hear.

Two days later Mr Raikes came in his car at half-past five and drove them down to the White Cross Hotel near Sevenoaks. He offered the front seat beside him to Sheikh Ahmed, but the old man, having often noticed that Western courtesy required the chief lady passenger to sit beside the gentleman driver, pushed Badriya into it, saying, "You sit there. You'll see better."

Sheikh Ahmed's manners delighted Mr Raikes, who quickly conducted the other three into the back and jumped with alacrity into his own seat beside the brown houri.

Mahmoud sat raging silently in the back, hating his father even more than he hated the Englishman. His reason was utterly powerless against this surge of ridiculous jealousy. Its arguments—sane, sober, civilised—merely shrivelled in the flames to which they were addressed. Nothing could reconcile him to the thought that even for a casual hour the pleasure of Badriya's proximity should be another's and not his. And when the Englishman turned occasionally to ask her if she was comfortable or point out something of interest on the road, and she answered or smiled back, his anger spurted a new flame.

They were out of London now and passing lovely country, the green glowing with the gold of the slanting sun, but he had no eye for it. Mr Raikes turned round to ask them how they were feeling at the back, and Mahmoud could have murdered him for the insolence of his question. He could see from her back that Badriya was enjoying herself. She laughed several times at things the Englishman said. . . . She could have declined to sit in front if she had wanted to; she could have said she wanted to sit with Miss Bannerman in the back. Why hadn't she done that? Because she didn't care; because she was a worthless slip of a stupid girl on account of whom he had thrown away his degree!

Mr Raikes saw them settled at the hotel, hovered round for a while offering sundry attentions, then tentatively announced his intention of departing in the near future, relying on Sheikh

Ahmed's Oriental courtesy to frustrate it—which of course it did. It being nearly dinner-time, and Mr Raikes having brought them all the way from London, it was in the circumstances unheard of that Mr Raikes should leave without partaking of food. Mr Raikes therefore stayed to dinner.

"What about the riding?" he asked Badriya. "We'll start with low fences that high; is that all right? Could you jump that, do you think?"

She laughed. "A donkey could jump that," she said.

"Splendid! I see you're going to be brave."

"She's bought a new suit of riding clothes," said Sheikh Ahmed.

"I don't think I particularly want to ride," said Mahmoud, knowing that it was in his hands to kill the project. More than anything at that moment, he wanted the Englishman to know that Badriya was his wife. That fact had not been mentioned before him yet.

"Why don't you want to ride?" said Sheikh Ahmed.

"I think the weather is too hot for it, just now . . . we'll see later."

Mr Raikes, while ignorant of Mahmoud's status in relation to the girl, realised that his co-operation was necessary to the friendly motion of things, and that he must therefore make up to him more than he had been doing.

"What college were you at?" he asked with a new friendliness. Mahmoud told him.

"Oh, I was at the House," said Mr Raikes, introducing himself as a blood-cousin in the academic peerage. This Public-School-and-Ancient-University snob gambit, as he called it, had always tickled Mahmoud. . . . "Oh, Rugby; I was at Winchester . . ."—and the relationship is established, the positions in the family-tree of culture determined to mutual satisfaction, though perhaps sometimes with a little pang of jealousy among the barons towards the viscounts, as it were, or among the viscounts towards the dukes.

"What did you read?" asked Mr Raikes, seeking for further bonds.

"P.P.E."

"I'm afraid I couldn't rise to that," said Mr Raikes in modest truth, but also trying to ingratiate himself through modesty. "I read history and got a third; my tutor rather unkindly assured me that any fool could get a third in history; and I relied on his word. . . . You've just taken Schools, haven't you? I suppose you'll get a first."

"I wasn't able to finish my exams. I was ill."

"I say, that was rotten luck. I'm sorry."

Mr Raikes was somewhat disconcerted that his overtures to the young man had struck such an unfortunate subject, and he naturally put down Mahmoud's moroseness to the distressing experience of which he had just learned. He left shortly after, having invited them to spend the whole of Sunday at his home, which was three miles away.

When he was gone, Mahmoud, ignoring his father and Badriya, turned to Miss Bannerman.

"I suppose he thought he was being charmingly modest when he volunteered the information that he was too stupid to get anything better than a third. . . . Did you think he was?" he asked with a touch of aggressiveness.

"I don't know," she said, smiling. "I didn't stop to analyse it."

"He wasn't. . . he was being very arrogant."

"Arrogant?"

"Yes. It's the old feudal mentality which I find just as offensive as intellectual conceit. In my country there's a lot of intellectual conceit, which is the inferiority complex of the educated in a colonial territory; it's their only prop against humiliation and insecurity. But Englishmen like Mr Raikes have so much security in other ways, and are so safe from humiliation, that they enjoy glorying in their ability to dispense with brains. It's enough that they are English; that they belong to the English upper class; that they have been to Eton and Christ Church; that they have an empire to provide them with careers which require 'character' and athletic skill more than intellect. . . . Isn't that it?"

She found him unusually bitter, and reacted in a light vein. "Gracious!" she said. "I confessed to you the other day that I hadn't been clever enough to get more than a third; I hope you didn't think I was being arrogant too!"

He laughed, already a little ashamed of his outburst.

"No, no," he said. "That's different; you are a woman. What I said applies only to English men—or some of them."

He became quiet, taking himself to task for the bitterness that had escaped from him, and which he knew to be the bitterness of a certain envy. In a way he could not help, he even admired Mr Raikes' assurance and poise, and wished to think that he could be as intellectually modest.

He took no notice of Badriya, and even when the two of them were left alone in the lounge after dinner, he remained silent, looking away from her.

She said, "You look angry. Why are you so quiet?"

Anger fled from his heart and love rushed back. He turned round, smiling with the repentant tenderness that comes after anger, enchanted with her question, with the note of concern in it.

"No," he said, "of course I'm not angry. . . . Do you like this place?"

"Yes, but I don't like it when you remain quiet and don't speak to me. I think you are angry."

For answer he put out his hand and took hers, then looking round and seeing that the lounge was empty, he started stroking her arm up to the elbow. The little dimple in her elbow-pit looked entrancing. He sank a finger in it and tickled her. She giggled happily, then said, "Will you start teaching me to swim tomorrow?" In detailing the attractions of the place Mr Raikes had mentioned that there was a river with a lock close by, excellent for bathing.

"Yes," he said. "Tomorrow morning, before lunch."

She looked up at him with the intimacy of a naughty child and said, "Let's go before breakfast; before the others have got up, very early. It will be nicer then; there will be no people."

"All right," he said, delighted. "At six o'clock. Can you get up at six?"

"Yes, the sun rises so early here."

"Very well, then; the one who wakes up first will knock on the other's door—three knocks, like this. . . ." And he tapped a conspiratorial demonstration on the arm of the chair, looking very solemn. "And don't tell anybody we are going; we can go and come back before they come down to breakfast." Their eyes met in happy mischief, and when he pressed her hand, to his infinite joy her fingers tightened on his in return.

"Which costume will you wear—the white or the yellow?" he asked.

"The white," she said. "No, the yellow . . . the white . . . which do you think is the nicer?"

"I can't tell till I have seen you in both."

"What important conference is going on here?" they heard Sheikh Ahmed saying behind them. Mahmoud dropped her hand quickly and looked at his father to see if he had noticed anything. Sheikh Ahmed's brows were lifted and his lids stretched in humorous solemnity, a pretended veil through which gleamed happy secrets.

"Nothing," said Mahmoud casually, but glad that his father had seen, and now knew. And when a moment later Badriya left them, the old man looked at his son in happy triumph and said:



"You like the lassie now, eh? . . . you sly dog! You don't think your father's choice was so bad, after all? I am so happy, my son; I can't tell you how happy I am. And when we go back home, we shall have the biggest marriage feast they have yet seen in our country—I promise you that. I don't mind if I spend a thousand pounds on it; by God, I don't. And then you'll go in to her and make her pregnant and bring me a grandson to give joy to my grey hairs. . . . Only be patient for a few weeks." Then he added, rounding off his happiness, "And pray God it will be all right about your degree, as Mr Wentworth said."

Mahmoud knew that his upbringing had instilled into him something of the English inhibition about sex. In his country there was no such inhibition, no sense of shame about the physical facts of marriage. The language of the Koran was very explicit on the subject. There you did not vaguely 'lie' with your wife or come to 'know' her . . . and the word without any embarrassment—since it was the word of God—was often used in ordinary speech. People did not shrink from it. Fathers talked naturally to their sons of 'making their wives pregnant' and the sons found nothing coarse in it. But when his father said it now, he winced. He did not want his father to talk to him about anything like that. He did not want to think of it himself in those terms. He wanted it to remain private and secret and delicate. He hated 'going in to her' and the blunt statement of the biological consequences. And when his father said, "Just be patient for a few weeks," he resented the suggestion that he was in a hurry, while every bit of him was crying for it now, that night . . . crying for it in sweet anonymity, away from the feast of a thousand pounds and the loud publicity of the rape performance.

He went into his room, facing hers across the passage, and lay down on the bed in his clothes, feeling splendidly victorious. Mr Raikes had shrivelled into insignificance. His fingers still tingled from the pressure of hers; his eyes in their depths still collected the streams of her laughter, happy, privately naughty, for him! She had said, "It will be nicer then; there will be no people." She wanted to be with him alone!

He looked at his watch. It was eleven. In another seven hours he would be knocking on her door, or he would hear the three little knocks on his, if he was still asleep . . . but he wouldn't be asleep. He would be up at five.

Suddenly his heart jumped. Three little taps had sounded on his door. He looked at his watch again, quickly, thinking he might have swooned away the seven hours and come to morning already.

But it was five past eleven, and again came the three little taps. He leapt to the door and opened it quietly. Badriya in her dressing-gown greeted him with the same naughty smile of conspiracy, and without waiting for him to say anything slipped in, saying, "Shut the door!" He fumbled for the handle and shut it.

"Look," she said, laughing, "I've come to show you. This is the white costume." And she drew back her dressing-gown.

"It's beautiful," he said, weak with excitement, gazing at the exquisite brown figure startlingly clasped in its two belts of white. "You look lovely in it." He remained motionless where he stood, not daring to look again at the frank, unashamed peep of her navel just above the lower belt.

"Now I'll go back and put on the yellow, and you shall say which I am to wear tomorrow." She opened the door and slipped out before he could speak again. He remained standing at the door where she had left him, trembling with the hammer-beats of his heart and hearing nothing else in the silence. They beat with the unbearable throb of climax. They beat with a wild, urgent sense of opportunity not to be stilled. And they beat, before her disarming childishness and the fifteen years of her age which he could not forget, with a sick fear and shame that paralysed him. When they had returned from the cinema at Oxford, her childish pleasure with the film had filled him with a compassion which drove out desire. But a new, sharp desire, eager to possess, had sprung from his jealousy in the car, and was now battling with the new compassion over the innocent-naughty mannequin display of the bathing-suits in furtive flits across the passage.

The second time she did not knock. He just saw the handle of the door turning before she slipped in. Again she stepped a few feet away and drew back the dressing-gown.

"Which is nicer?" she asked. "Which shall I wear?" And she looked down the length of her figure to accompany his eyes.

He liked the yellow more. The white on the brown was more brilliant, more arresting, but a little harsh and cold, brilliant with the hard dazzle of ice. The yellow toned warmly into the brown skin, with a soft glow, like candle-light on old oak.

"Wear this one," he said.

"This is the one I like best too," she said, pleased, and she was about to slip out again, when he said gently, "Don't go."

They looked at each other mutely, with the needle-point of meaning which instinct has given men and women to replace speech in the imperative moment. Then she dropped her eyes, and he knew that she was not merely a child. He came forward and

lifted her left hand, holding it in both his, and while she still looked on the ground, said:

"You asked me when we were alone in the lounge if I was angry, and I said I wasn't, but that wasn't quite true. I had been angry."

She looked up quickly. "Angry with me?"

"No," he lied in part. "Not with you—but because I didn't have you sitting next to me in the car. I was jealous, because I want you so much. . . . Do you want me, Badriya?"

Again her eyes fled in confusion to the floor, but he was not afraid to put his arms round her and press his mouth on her lips. He took her in between the sides of the dressing-gown and held her half-naked figure close, kissing her passionately. She did not kiss him back, but she let him kiss her, and he knew that she did not dislike it. But when a moment later he let go of her and went to the door and locked it, she started in alarm and ran to the door herself, saying, "No, no; you mustn't do that! Let me go."

"Why?" he asked miserably, pleading. "We are married."

She looked at him with a large wonder in her eyes, and said:

"You can't . . . you can't come in to me without the proper ceremony at home."

He opened the door and she passed out. . . . So she thought of it in those terms too! The pretended forcible seizure, the unwinding of the calico bands, the screams, the evidence of virginity! He shuddered to think of her swathed in the calico, fold upon fold, after the airy grace of the bathing-suit—her feet hennaed, her hair and body greased with scented oils, her head caparisoned in gold and strings of beaded jewellery . . . and that was what she wanted! That was her world, the world of their harem. Did he think that a few weeks in England had taken all that out of her?

He saw in a moment of clarity that her apparent freedom, the refreshing things he liked in her now—the bicycle ride, the bathing conspiracy, the flitting across the passage in the new costumes, came from the child in her, the girl that had not become a woman yet—but that over her womanhood the shadow of the harem lay, clutching. . . . Could he save her from that clutch? She was young, and if she loved him he could win perhaps, but he would be alone fighting against centuries, fighting because he loved her now and because the lovely child that was still in her could, if preserved, if kept in the fresh and uncorrupting air, become part of her womanhood and save it.

He woke up at a quarter to five, and could not sleep again. The sun was already climbing over the tree-tops, which he could see

from his bed; and in the terrestrial silence, the bird music of the sunrise poured from the sky pure and vibrant, and so individually distinct from each lusty throat that the songster's station in space could be guessed. Behind the thin coolness of the morning the hot flush of the coming day lay imminent. A blundering bee whirled into the room and was caught, going out, on the window-pane. Its blind instinct held by the light and ignorant of the mean mystery of glass, it began its fruitless whirrings up and down the impenetrable luminosity. Mahmoud watched it for some time as it crawled bewildered, or took off and came on for a break-through again and again, or sank fatigued into the corner of the pane. Then he got up and with the tip of his pen pushed it gently out of the corner and over the edge. As though sucked by a vacuum, it vanished in an instant into its blue freedom and the next flower.

He stood at the window, looking out on the young morning and its warbling, humming activity in field and wood before the world awoke. There were no people about anywhere. The road, which he could see belting the hill, was empty of traffic. Nothing visible moved on the ground, but he could sense the secret quiver of life in the grass and hedges, and suddenly a rabbit darted out of the shadows under a group of elms, stood poised for a moment, then dived hopping into the sheltering grass, its shyness flashing a single note of contrast to the strident, secure audacity of the birds.

A glowing, sharp awareness of all this beauty filled him. Every dew-point on the grass, every silver-point of music in the sky, pierced into his bloodstream, and the unseen pulses of life around him beat in his own heart.

At ten to six he knocked on her door. He had to knock twice before she answered, then he waited just inside his room with the door half open. Ten minutes later she came out, and they went down quietly, talking in whispers. The hotel staff had not begun to stir yet.

"Who will open for us?" she asked.

"Fortunately we can open for ourselves." There was a bolt which he pushed back, then he turned the handle and they went out. The freshness of the morning outside was limpid and fragile like thin crystal. The air was filtered—unbelievably, endlessly transparent, and held nothing in it but the sunshine and the laughter of the birds; and in the low slant of the light colour lay on everything like a miracle. He noticed her catching her breath in wonder, and even the clattering passage of a van as they turned to walk down the road seemed no desecration.

They walked along the road for a while, then turned into the path that led across the fields to the river.

"Why are you silent?" he said, noticing a strain in her manner.

She did not answer for a moment, then said, "I thought you might be angry with me."

He took her hand and they walked in silence for some time.

"I thought," she said timidly, "that perhaps you wouldn't want to teach me to swim now because I didn't stay with you last night. . . . I woke up before six, but I wanted to see if you still wanted to come."

A thickness in his throat prevented him from speaking. There was no one in sight around them. Stopping in the path, he drew her to him. She looked up slowly and her lips came to meet his.

"You like me?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Not just because I am your cousin, as you said that day in the taxi?"

She shook her head.

"And you're glad to be married to me?"

"Yes," she said, looking away, then cried, "Look, a rabbit!" Another rabbit had ventured into the open, only to scuttle away immediately, *flashing its white tail at them in long swerving springs* that plunged it into cover again. She laughed happily, watching it bound and disappear.

"How shy it is!" she said. Then she became aware of the birds, and said, "It's like in our country after the rains; there are so many of them and they are so gay."

They walked with a new gaiety themselves, and soon reached the river behind the lock, under a high wall of trees. In the still surface every leaf was mirrored.

"Now, you can tell how the fishes are feeling this morning," he said. "If they are as gay and cheeky as the birds, they will come and tickle your toes." And as she screamed in laughing alarm, he asked, "Where is your costume?"

"I've got it on under my dress," she said.

He went behind a tree and put on his, and when he came back she was standing on the bank, her figure zoned in brown and yellow, looking at her shadow in the water, where her breasts, cupped in the yellow, looked like fresh half-lemons.

"I am afraid," she said, "it will be cold."

"I will go in first," he said, "and find out what the bottom is like and where you can come in." He dived, shattering the surface, then swam back to the bank and walked about feeling the depth

with his feet. The brown and yellow zones of her figure rippled in crazy corrugations, the lemon cones bobbed up and down in the dancing water.

"Here," he said. "Come down here; this way."

"Is it very cold?"

"No, give me your hand and step down on this ledge."

She gave him her hand, put one foot on the ledge and dipped the other in gingerly, sloping her pink-capped toes, then drew it out screaming.

"Come on," he said, and pulled her down. She tumbled in, crying and laughing, immersed to the level of the yellow circle on her thigh, gasping from shock, her feet shrinking from the slime that slithered between the toes.

"Let me go," she wailed. "I'm cold!"

"You'll get used to it in a moment; dip your whole body quickly, and you won't feel cold any more—like this. . . ." And he sank himself to the neck in one movement, pulling her down with him. She jumped up, panting, glistening and uttering little laughing screams, shaking the water from her eyes. Then she cried:

"It's nice now. Oh, it's lovely." And she dipped herself again and again, bending her knees and sinking slowly, then jumping up, exhilarated with vigour. "Now, I must swim; teach me," she said, attuned to the water. Her shoulders gleamed in the wetness.

He put out his hand and she lay on it and sprawled and splashed, puffing, choking, blowing water out of her mouth and laughing. Then he made her lie on her back, stiff and straight, with her arms spread out, to teach her to float. And she remained stretched out rigidly as bidden as long as she felt his hand under her back; but the moment he tried to withdraw it, she doubled up floundering, and her arms went for his neck; then he caught her and stood her on her feet.

"You mustn't do that," she scolded. "I should sink! Don't leave me."

"Do you think I would really let you sink?"

"No . . ." she said, pouting, "but it feels as if I'm going to. I don't like it."

"You look very pretty when you do this," he said.

"Do what?"

He stuck out his lips in a solemn pout, and when she laughed he took her in his arms and kissed her. They were waist deep in the water, and he held her tight against his bare chest. But her lips were cold and trembling, and when he released her he saw that they had gone blue from the cold. He took her out quickly

and ran with her in the sun until her warmth came back. Then they lay down on the grass.

"Oh, it's nice like this," she said, stretching her limbs to the day. "The sun is now hot as in our country, but the grass is cool."

They were still alone in this green world, except for the birds and the rabbits they could not see. Here she was not a woman of the harem, with greased hair, but a lovely girl of the fields dipped in water and sunshine, and growing out of the grass. Even her fifteen years did not seem wrong in this bed of nature, ripe and tender in the young morning and the young summer.

He said to her, "I don't want our marriage to be like all the other marriages in our country. I don't want a lot of people to be there watching us, waiting outside when we go into our room. I want us to be alone . . . like this. Isn't it much nicer?"

She looked away from him, but he held her face and turned it so that their eyes met.

"Isn't it?" he repeated.

She nodded, and a great sudden softness came upon her as he gathered her into his arms and her warm body felt the warmth of his in the cool grass.

After that, he came to her room every night when the others were asleep, and they slept together till the dawn, when they went down to the river and bathed. The joy of this secret love, stolen from a traditional marriage, smuggled night after night across the hotel passage, behind the back of the old customs, filled the nights with sweet magic and the days with serene contentment.

And his jealousy exorcised by the proud possession of love, he found to his surprise that he was looking forward with satisfaction to Sunday and the reappearance of Mr Raikes.

## PART II

### CHAPTER I

A SANDSTORM had been blowing over the town the whole night. It had come as usual after a tense, stifling calm the previous afternoon. For several hours not a crease had appeared in the glassiness of the river, not a feather had stirred in the motionless heat; and the air had lain in a massive deadliness on everything, almost too heavy to breathe, pressing out the body's moisture on lawns and terraces, but refusing to dry it. And then, into the great dark vacuum the desert had been sucked and its invisible mountains of fine orange and chocolate dust had come rolling. When they came by day, it looked as though the Himalayas had suddenly dissolved into their component particles and swept down on the world like a mad sea. But at night, the boiling evolutions of the advancing wall could not be seen. . . . Suddenly, in the black stillness, you heard a few leaves crackle, a branch flap the walls, and you smelt dust; and a moment later the ocean of sand was upon you, lashing, stinging, drowning everything. For hours the desert poured itself into you through every aperture and crack in your house and body, found your face under the pillow, powdered your hair, kohled your eyes, blocked your nostrils, piled up in drifts within your ear and left grit in your teeth.

The Chief Secretary, Sir William Carter, had weathered the storm sleeping on the roof. The choice on such occasions was between the comparatively dust-free and oven-hot air of the bedroom, stirred by the electric fan, and the comparatively cool whipping of the dust hurricane on the roof; and Sir William was among those who preferred the latter. Like the natives, he shrouded himself completely in his top sheet and buried his head under the pillow.

He got up at sunrise and came down to have tea with the young District Commissioner, who was staying with him and who had slept indoors. Sir William was a bachelor and often had unmarried officials staying with him in his large house on the river front—District Commissioners in the capital on a few days' duty, friends passing through when going on leave or returning, new recruits for



whom accommodation had not yet been found. At fifty, and despite twenty-eight years in the country, he was still youthful in spirit and liked surrounding himself with young company. And the young officials liked him and flocked around him because he was brilliant, witty and enormously human. In any stuffy atmosphere his humour filtered through the tiniest crack. On the stiffest occasion, when you were standing in levee dress on the steps of the palace suffocating with the heat and pomp of protocol, or drinking the solemn tea of a garden party, he could from twenty yards away give you a wink, almost a leer, from his tanned, unofficial, weather-beaten face, that pricked the huge balloon instantly. And though the second man in a colonial government, he could give the same wink to one of his many friends among the natives.

When he went into his bedroom, his servant Babikr, who had accompanied him on his many travels and transfers for fifteen years, was dusting the dressing-table.

"Good morning, Babikr," said Sir William, feeling the corners of his mouth gummed together with the moistened dust.

"Good morning, Your Excellency," said Babikr, who was tall, good-looking and dignified. "Very bad storm last night." He passed on with his feather-duster to the chest of drawers and wardrobe.

Sir William looked at himself in the glass. He was very dark for an Englishman, had an almost Indian complexion and cast of features, except for the grey-blue eyes which now looked more than usually incongruous out of the rim of chocolate dust around them.

"By God, Babikr," he said, "I am greener than you this morning. I only lack the tribal marks on the cheek to make me pass for a cattle-owning Arab from the western provinces." He used, like the natives, the Arabic word for green to describe the brown resultant from Arab and negro fusion. Then he cut with his finger two parallel marks through the dust on each cheek, and turned to face Babikr, saying, "What think you? Isn't that so, by God?"

Babikr permitted his delight a respectful grin, saying:

"Wallahi, just so, Your Excellency."

"Is Mr Martin up?"

"He's just gone down, Your Excellency, and the tea is ready."

Sir William went into the bathroom to give his face a rub with the sponge and brush his teeth. Shaving and the bath could wait till after tea, but this was imperative now. He enjoyed starting the day by having a little pleasantry with Babikr. He had no illusions

about Babikr's ethics in relation to his cigarettes and whisky, and he suspected that when they were on trek Babikr used to make his little commission on purchases from the market. But these could all be considered as legitimate perquisites; and were certainly considered so by Babikr himself, whose honesty was quite adamant in regard to cash left lying about, encroachment on which could not be juggled out of the category of theft.

Rex Martin was waiting downstairs in the large sitting-room which ran across the house from north to south between the two verandahs, and whose large doors and windows were now open to capture the brief coolness of the morning after the storm. Sir William came down in red native slippers and a green dressing-gown, his bald copper head burnished from the sponging it had just had. When he was not grinning, his face below the bronze slope had a fine intellectual look. It was a spare face, round at the top, but coming to two firm points in the chin and the nose, and the head was massive and roundly moulded, with the fringe of hair at the back forming a wide V round the bronze bareness.

"I'd give anything," he said, leering at Martin as he sat down, "to see Maria getting up from her bed on a morning like this. I often peer across, but you can't see much through the lattice screen." The vulgar mischief of the smile rippled in circles round his india-rubber lips.

"Is Lady Jupiter living next-door now? Since when?"

"Since Jupiter was promoted." The two of them, visualising the most ungodlike form of Beresford-Jones, burst into laughter while Sir William poured the tea. Then Sir William said:

"That's misleading, you know. I rather think I slipped up at the christening; in fairness to poor Bunny, it should have been, 'Lady Maria Jupiter'."

Rex Martin lit a cigarette and Sir William filled his pipe. Outside the sun was rising in a sky of charred orange, still murky from the settling dust. Shorn of its sword-like flames, it climbed like a large, pale disc, clear-rimmed without its corona. But you could feel the veiled, fierce threat of its virility beginning to pierce through. The mass movement of the wind had gone, but occasionally a lingering tongue licked the verandah, and a few wreaths of dust spiralled up from the warming tiles. A grey, powdery dullness lay on the greenery of the garden, dimming even the glazed leaves of the great mahogany tree and the crumpled scarlet blooms of the canna. It was a dirty, gritty world about to be clutched in a scorching hand.

"Are you going to her party this evening?" Martin asked.

"Oh, it's today, is it? Yes, I'll drop in for a few minutes. I must. I cut the last one, and she was very angry. Like every snob, she's terribly vulnerable."

"Didn't she try to marry you to a younger sister a few years ago?" Trying to marry Sir William to somebody or other was a perennial enterprise in the town, and like every great enterprise it had its promoters and opponents. The opponents usually were those who had already tried and failed, or those who were not yet ready to enter the field with their candidates.

"I was warned of my danger by Mrs Cartwright," said Sir William. Mrs Cartwright belonged to the former camp.

"The old cat!" said Martin. "Wouldn't Maria just love to tear out her eyes if she knew!"

"She knew," said Sir William, "I told her."

"You didn't!"

"I conveyed it to her, diplomatically."

After the tea and the six o'clock news from London, Sir William shaved, bathed, and went out in shorts and open-collared shirt for the walk which he often took along the river front before breakfast when he had an important day ahead of him. It soothed him before the coming heat and stress—the rhythm of his springy walk, the broad peaceful sweep of the river, with its broad low sailing boats that passed majestically on an even keel, the water-wheel that droned away its monotonous 'cello music under the palms. . . . He had a Council meeting that morning on a crucial issue. It was to decide whether the Legislative Assembly, which the Government had agreed in principle to set up, was to be a reality or not. His progressive policy had won the day so far as to get the Assembly accepted by Council as a scheme on paper, but the diehards were still strong and determined to fight every inch of the way, beating out their well-known tune—'premature' . . . 'it isn't time yet' . . . 'you can't begin to run before you can walk'. But he knew it was more than time if the country was not to go sour on them, time to have an Assembly with genuine powers and native ministers responsible to it, time to put natives into many of the higher administrative posts, time to show the people that Britain was sincere. For years the guiding principle of his policy had been to do things in time, not to wait and haggle and offer phantoms until there was nothing but a blind, emotional hatred all round to treat with.

Walking along the river bank, passing the large houses of the senior British officials of his class, monuments of an early imperial age, he wondered how many of his colleagues really saw

the truth so plain to him—that that imperial age was irretrievably gone, that vast changes were taking place in the world which before many decades would bring the British Empire, as a colonial system, to a final end; and that the choice before Britain was whether that end was to be one of bitterness, blood and ruin, or a peaceful, friendly transformation into a new relationship with her former dependencies. . . . He was sure that some of them, like the Major-General and Beresford-Jones, were congenitally incapable of seeing that, and believed that Englishmen would for ever continue to play golf and drink pink gin and read the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sporting and Dramatic*, under African and Asian skies canopied by the Union Jack. But even among the intelligent ones who saw where things were going, there were few who realised how definitely near and certain the end was. The majority saw it as an ultimate, very vaguely ultimate, eventuality. Often, when he saw them over their cocktails and bridge in the evening, at the club or in each other's houses, they reminded him of the French aristocracy before the Revolution. It would be like that at Lady Jupiter's that evening . . . and because his policy had made a certain headway, the reactionaries were now up in arms against him. In sections of the Service there was an 'anti-Carter' movement, stone-walling, sabotage. It was going to be a difficult Council meeting that morning. . . . He bit hard on the pipe which he held extinct between his teeth, and above the white-rimmed circle of his eyes the jutting eyebrows bristled slightly. Two little wiry tufts always stuck out of them at the corners, pointing away from the curve of the bone.

While Sir William was taking his walk, an old friend of his, Sheikh Ayyoub Shendi, was sitting on the verandah of his house across the river, drinking his early morning coffee and smoking his third cigarette. Like the Chief Secretary, he had spent the night in the open, swathed in a sheet on his palm-matted bed in the garden, but something other than the storm had kept him awake most of the night.

As usual, his daughter Aisha had brought him the little tray carrying the earthenware coffee-pot and the squat bell-shaped cup, and he sat smoking and pouring himself one cup after another. The cup was a miniature bowl without a handle, and his old hand shook as he lifted it by the rim, between his thumb and index-finger, but lifelong practice had left in his wrist a sensitive sense of balance for this operation, and by an apparent miracle not a drop was spilt though the fluid touched the rim. He did not sip his coffee. He took it in the only way he could enjoy a hot drink—in

long, hissing sucks, almost atomising the hot liquid between the rim of the cup and his lips; and as he was preoccupied that morning, the hissing was longer and louder than usual, just as the smoke went deeper into his lungs when he inhaled.

He had not told the women of the family—his wife and two daughters—about the letter he had had from his son, Amin, the day before. And of his five other sons, two were still students at the college and two away in the provinces. Only the eldest was in the town. He was the local district judge, a man of forty now and with a large family of his own. He was the first person to whom Sheikh Ayyoub naturally turned for consultation in this crisis. He had sent him a message the evening before, and was expecting him to come on his way to the court.

He took the letter out of his pocket and read it again, then folded it and inserted it under the coffee tray, ready to be handed to his son as soon as he came. . . . So that was the result of sending Amin to be educated in England—marrying an English girl and afraid to come back! Giving your son every advantage, and then losing him! And what did he want with an English wife, anyhow? Weren't there girls enough in his country? An English wife!

He had repeated the phrase in anger and incredulity, but some of its echoes in his mind carried a strange thrill of pride, and he repeated again, with less anger but more incredulity, "An English wife!" . . . almost smiling to himself. Then he lifted the round, glazed coffee-pot, poured himself another cup and replaced it on its beaded-lifebelt stand. The rich red of its bottom was darkened by the fire like the bowl of an old briar pipe, and as it rested sideways on its stand, the long neck slanted gracefully above the table.

When he finished the coffee, he called for a jug of water for his ablutions. Though he had now a modern bathroom in the house, and there was a wash-basin in the wall at the bottom of the verandah, he needed the jug for washing his feet, which he still did in the manner he had learned in his youth. He rinsed his mouth and washed his hands at the wash-basin, pulling back the large episcopal sleeves of his white calico shirt and tucking them well above the long skinny forearms. Then he sat on the edge of the verandah floor, put his feet out in turn over the edge and washed them. With one hand he poured the water from the slender spout of the tin jug, and with the other he washed, rubbing the foot all over and meticulously between the toes.

With all the orifices and extremities of the body thus purified (his more private ablutions he had already performed on getting

up), he went into his room and prayed on his old Bokhara rug, which for thirty years had been reserved for this purpose. His tall, thin figure, barefooted, erect in the long white shirt, and his black bony face, fringed and cut across with a sparse growth of white hair, had a saintly dignity as it spoke to God and faced the birth-place of his Prophet one thousand miles to the east. The words came with quiet fervour, unstaled by repetition—"In the name of God, the All Merciful, All Compassionate, the Ruler of the Day of Judgment . . . I testify that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed is the Messenger of Allah . . . God is Great, God is Great. . . ." And before that greatness, the tall figure knelt and knelt again, and the erect back bent down until the old black head touched the ground and the white beard mingled with the red and black pattern of the Bokhara rug.

His consciousness of the presence of God was immediately followed, as he was slipping his feet into the red slippers again, by his consciousness of the presence of his son, the district judge, on the verandah. For the district judge was six foot two and weighed sixteen stone. He also walked briskly, with a charging gait, his head slightly bent, puckered in thought, but ready in an instant to bellow out laughter. Somebody must have spoken to him at the gate, for the house shook suddenly with his happy thunder. Sheikh Ayyoub came out, and the lingering smile of the district judge ceased to linger when he saw his father's serious countenance.

"What's the matter, Yaba," he asked. "Anything wrong?"

"I had this letter from Amin yesterday," said Sheikh Ayyoub. "Read it." They sat down at the table, the district judge squeezing himself into a cane chair of conventional size. He put on his glasses and read, and his face puckered. His eyes were rather small in the large face, and when it puckered they slanted narrowly with a Chinese glint. But now, after narrowing, they suddenly sprang out.

"God is Great!" he said, more in astonishment than in anger. "This is news! By God, this is news!"

"And what is your opinion, Saleh; can we stop him from doing it? If you and I were to write to him . . . or shall we cable?"

"Is he writing to ask for your permission so that you may be able to stop it? He just tells you that he's going to do it. This is how the English marry. They inform their parents. They don't seek their permission or listen to them. It seems that this is what our Amin has learned at Oxford!" The district judge was not horrified. Even his apparent condemnation of the marrying habits of the English young had an undertone of approval, springing

from the lack of felicity in his own married life, and Amin was his favourite brother.

"But a girl of an alien race, an English girl, a Nazarene!"

"And since when did love go back for a passport when it saw a frontier? Isn't a man and a woman a woman when they come together, be they white or black or yellow?" Saleh fixed his father with a look of mature wisdom based on the experience of others.

"Couldn't the Government stop it?" Sheikh Ayyoub, like most men of his generation among the natives, ascribed to their Government an omnipotence and a reach of jurisdiction second only to Allah's. Vaguely, he believed that a word from the Governor-General to Whitehall could prevent the marriage from taking place. At the back of his mind he also believed that the Government would want to stop this marriage. No native had married an English girl before. The Government might think it an insult to the English that this should happen—much worse than that an Englishman should marry a native girl, as one or two eccentric district commissioners in the remoter parts of the country had done. In the native mentality, there was something physically humiliating about the position of the woman in marriage, an indignity inherent in the sexual act. And Sheikh Ayyoub, in his awe, felt uneasy at the thought of his son inflicting this indignity on the Government and the British race.

"The Government prevent it?" said his son, whose generation and profession were better informed on the limits of governmental authority. "How can the Government prevent it? It has nothing to do with them, a marriage taking place in England."

"But they could prevent it from taking place here, couldn't they?"

"Not officially, not legally. How could they? . . . But if the two were coming to get married here and the Government knew of it and wanted to prevent it, they could stop the girl from coming into the country. Or if something like that started here, the Government could send the girl away."

"M'm," said Sheikh Ayyoub, dwelling at some length on the second 'm', which meant that he was pondering something still at some distance from the surface. . . . "And they would do it, would they not?"

"They might . . . but it hasn't arisen yet."

"They would not like a son of the country to marry an English girl."

"Maybe, but there are no race laws in our country, no colour

bar. . . . That's because there are no white settlers, as in Kenya and South Africa. The British have no home here; they are just temporary—rulers who come and go.”

“But while they are here, they wouldn't want a native to marry one of the rulers.”

“I am not saying they would like it, but whether they would interfere officially would, in my opinion, depend on the circumstances of the case. I've come to know the British very well. They are a practical people. They don't go by general rules. They prefer to judge each case on its merits . . . on its merits. Now, if it were a case of the son of Abu Osman, next door, and the daughter of the Governor-General. . . . Ha! Ha! Ha!” The sixteen stone shook with the mighty explosion, delighted with the quaintness of the example.

“By God, they would still mind, I am saying, if it were you and the daughter of Mr Swinnerton.” Mr Swinnerton was the sanitary inspector.

“M'm,” said the district judge, seeing that there would be difficulties. The puckered look of reflection had instantly replaced the great laughing billows, and it seemed amazing that so much moving volume could come to rest so swiftly, almost like a locomotive stopping dead in mid-career.

Their thoughts, approaching by devious routes, had now met before the real crux of the situation. Neither of them was irreconcilably horrified at the thought of the marriage itself. Saleh had noted with approval that his proposed sister-in-law would be an Oxford graduate, and the mention of the unpopular but useful Uncle Leopold had not failed to make an impression, both on him and his father. Any strangeness they felt about this alliance was offset by a secret flattering feeling that it would bring them, together with its awkwardness, a certain prestige.

“If he wants to marry an English girl,” said Sheikh Ayyoub, “let him marry an English girl. . . . But is this a reason why he should not come back and live in his country? He says Paris would be a good place for his painting! By God, do you see this nonsense? Is this going to be his career, messing about with paints on paper, like children! Is this a man's work?”

“In the West it can be an honourable career,” said Saleh.

“West, what? And honourable career, what?” said Sheikh Ayyoub, categorically rejecting this aspect of Western civilisation. “Is this what he spent three years at Ixford for? Did I spend all that money on his education so that he should end up by becoming a . . . a . . . decorator!”



"That's not the real reason. He is afraid to come here with an English wife."

"Ay, that he is. You have named it. Maybe she doesn't want to come. She knows our customs are different from hers."

"Maybe." The judge was thinking rather that she would fear the customs of her own people in a colony.

"It is natural for a woman not to wish to leave her home."

"She will be leaving it, anyhow, if they go to live in Paris."

"Ah, but it is all the same there; it is all West, isn't it?"

After a moment, Saleh said:

"If you have no objection to the marriage, we could at least write and press him to come. That is different from urging him to give the girl up; if we try to stop him from marrying, it will only confirm him in his determination not to return. But if he knew that he would find a welcome from us for both him and his wife, he might change his mind. Isn't that so?"

"Ay, but it is no use assuring him of our welcome, if we don't know what sort of welcome the Government will give them. Perhaps they won't let her come into the country at all."

"They won't do that if she is already his wife. They can't do it."

"But would they employ him?"

"If they didn't, the Nationalist Press would raise against them the clamour of the resurrection day. They daren't risk it just when the Assembly is being set up; and I don't think Sir William Carter would stand for victimisation."

"M'm," said Sheikh Ayyoub, and was silent for a moment; then he continued, "But we must be sure of that. I don't like to have any unpleasantness with the Government afterwards." Sheikh Ayyoub wanted to see if the idea that had occurred to him would also occur to his son, thus confirming his judgment, and was gratified when the next moment the judge said:

"Why don't you go and see Sir William Carter? He's an old friend of yours."

"You think it would be a good idea?"

"It's the only way of finding out what you want to know. He's a very reasonable man."

"Very well, then; I will go at once."

"And I will go in and see my mother for a moment," said Saleh. "But I must hurry; half the usurers in the town are appearing before me this morning, and their speech is as abundant as the interest they charge, God curse them."

"Don't tell her anything. She doesn't know yet. We'll see first what Sir Carter says."

The light side of the situation struck the district judge as he rose, and he chuckled affectionately, shaking his head, billowing gently and saying with great good humour, "May God make you scarce, O Amin . . . bringing my mother an English daughter-in-law."

## CHAPTER II

SIR WILLIAM had just finished his breakfast when Babikr came and told him that Sheikh Ayyoub Shendi wished to see him privately for a few moments. The Chief Secretary had first known Sheikh Ayyoub twenty-five years before, when he was an assistant district commissioner in the town. And when Amin had gone to Oxford, to Sir William's own college, he had given him a letter of introduction to the Warden.

The two men met with the customary effusion of greetings, at which Sir William had become quite an adept—not from official hypocrisy, but from a genuine reciprocation of warmth in the natural medium—and the repetition of which occupied from one to two minutes in something like the following combinations and permutations:

"How are you, Sheikh Ayyoub, how is it with you?"

"Well, thank God; and how are things with Your Excellency? Pray God, you are well. Pray God your people are well."

"Praise be to God, and how are yours; how are your sons?"

"Thanking God, they are well, and seeking your approval. Pray God you are in good health . . . pray God there is nothing amiss."

"Nothing amiss, thank God; pray God nothing amiss with you. I hope your sons are well . . . I have been longing to see you."

"My longing has been the greater. May it always be God's will that you prosper. It is a long time since I saw you last. God be my witness, my yearning to see you has been great."

"God be my witness too, so has mine, Sheikh Ayyoub. How is the market these days? Pray God your affairs continue to flourish."

"Thank God, there is nothing amiss."

Here, as usual, there was a slight pause, a sort of half-time breather, while both sides recuperated for the second round which began in a moment, flowing naturally in Arabic, without an effort, until the subject was exhausted from every conceivable angle. Then there was a moment of reminiscence, in which the two old-stagers reminded each other of amusing incidents in their common past—

that joke about what's-his-name when the two of them sat together on the Rates Assessment Board, and the speech made by so-and-so when the Chief Secretary was entertained to luncheon the previous year by the Chamber of Commerce, and so on. At last Sir William said:

"And how's your son who is in England? He is coming back this year, isn't he?"

Sheikh Ayyoub cleared his throat, aimed at the window, which was about six feet from his chair, and propelled through it a clean, almost invisible bullet of sputum. Sir William was quite familiar with this performance, and it did not disgust him. It astounded him. They did it so superbly that his feeling was always one of admiration, and it really was cleaner, he thought, than doing it into a handkerchief.

"He was, Your Excellency," said Sheikh Ayyoub. "But now I don't know; I am not sure."

"Why? What has happened?"

"He has brought me a great headache. It is about him I wish to speak to you. . . . He wants to marry an English girl, a fellow student of his at Ixford. I only learned of it yesterday." He looked at the Chief Secretary's face to see the effect of his announcement.

"Really?" said Sir William, and Sheikh Ayyoub was not sure what he meant by it. The surprise was easy to see, but there seemed to be no immediate disapproval, rather perhaps a little friendly interest. Then Sir William added, "And he wants to stay in England?"

"No. He says he will live in Paris, and work there with the Arabic Broadcasting Service." He did not mention the picture-making, partly because he was ashamed of it and partly because he knew it was not the real reason and he wanted to confront the Chief Secretary with that. Sir William looked thoughtful without speaking for a moment, and then Sheikh Ayyoub added:

"He is afraid to come back here with an English wife, Your Excellency."

"Afraid of you? Do you disapprove very much?"

"Maybe he is afraid of me and thinks that we would not give him and his wife welcome; maybe he fears that his wife would not be happy here because our life is backward; and maybe he is afraid of you."

"Of us?"

"Yes, of the Government, of the English here. It has never happened that a native of our country married an Englishwoman."

Sheikh Ayyoub, having fired the decisive shot, waited for the

answer. Sir William drew silently at his pipe for a moment, then looked at the worried old man and said :

"Until three years ago, Sheikh Ayyoub, it had never happened that a boy from this country went to Oxford . . . a time comes for everything to happen. Isn't that so?"

"Then can I tell him that the Government will not make difficulties for him if he comes home, and that he will find a job? I want Your Excellency's assurance on that."

"Look, Sheikh Ayyoub. I have often thought that this sort of thing might happen, that one day it was bound to happen. It has happened in many other countries where we have been, and it was not to be expected that this country would be an exception. Only I hoped that when it did happen, the circumstances would be reasonably favourable—you know what I mean, nice people, good character, suitable to one another, so that it would not be a disagreeable affair, and there would be a good chance of its bringing happiness, because it cannot be an easy thing."

"That is very true, Sir Carter."

"Well, it seems to me that the circumstances could not have been better than in the case of your son, who has received the best English education and is marrying a girl from his own university. And I can promise you that there will be no hostility whatever from the Government. I can promise you this in the name of the Governor-General, to whom I shall mention the matter at the first opportunity. But, you know, we here are people, like you. You always think of us as 'the Government', but that is wrong; we are also people, Mr So-and-so and Mrs So-and-so; and as with you, some of us are reasonable and nice and some are not; some have their noses in the air and stupid ideas in their brain." Sir William demonstrated the posture and tapped the stupid heads by proxy.

"Just so; just so," said Sheikh Ayyoub, laughing.

Sir William continued, "So, you see, though there will be no opposition from the Government—none whatever—some of our people will not like it and may not be very nice about it. He must not mind that; and if his wife is sensible, she will not mind it either. There will be quite enough people, I know, who will be nice to them. . . . And you, do you feel all right about it yourself; you are not angry with him?"

"God be my witness, Your Excellency, and I will speak frankly, it was a big shock at first. Of course, your women are greatly superior to ours and more civilised. Ours are ignorant, and yours are educated like the men, and it is an honour for my son to marry an English girl. But you can understand that people don't like

their son to marry a stranger; and if they know the stranger to be a superior person, they feel both proud and afraid, because their way of living may not be good enough for her. But Amin is not my only son; I have five besides him. He can live his own life with this English wife of his if he comes back. I shall write and tell him that. We will not interfere with them, and she need not follow any of our customs that she does not like. . . . No, God be my witness, I am not angry."

"Well, we will both do our best for him, Sheikh Ayyoub," said Sir William, moved by the candour and tolerant good sense of the old man. "He is doing a brave and difficult thing, and he will need help."

As he rose to go, Sheikh Ayyoub said :

"She seems to be a girl of good family; her uncle was once private secretary to the Governor-General of India . . . the Lord Kirzoun." He could not help feeling that this connection put her on a higher level than the English in his own country, by as much as the majesty of the Indian Empire dwarfed the humble status of the former, and by as much as Lord Curzon (whose name and reputation were well known in the country from the time he was Foreign Secretary) towered above the local Governor-General.

Half divining his trend of thought, the Chief Secretary said, "Was he really? . . . Then we must give her precedence over Mrs Charlton." And with their friendly laughter ringing in each other's ears the two men parted.

Though, as he had said to Sheikh Ayyoub, Sir William was not altogether unprepared for the first case of intermarriage in the country, he could have hoped it would come at a less inopportune time. With all the Toiy camp reacting angrily to his policy of the moment and rallying its forces for a last-ditch stand, he could not welcome any additions to his burden. Until the Assembly was firmly established, the fewer causes of minor friction there were between him and his opponents the better; and this marriage might easily cause trouble, not only with the English colony, but by repercussion with the nationalists, many of whom were themselves in an angry mood and lining up for a vicious attack on the Assembly. Some unpleasant little incident, a tactless word at a public place, and the extremist papers would instantly find a new channel for their vitriol. But it had happened, and the best had to be made of it. He had absolutely no doubt that the Governor-General would support him. The idea that a native boy, whom they had encouraged to go to England for his education, should feel constrained to stay away from his country because he was

marrying an English girl horrified him. Such a thing would not happen while he was Chief Secretary. And if the fear came from the girl, if she believed that her own people would make life disagreeable to her in her husband's country, something ought to be done to reassure her; somebody must get in touch with her. . . . He wondered how that could be done, if he should write to the Agency in London about it.

By the evening the dust had settled down completely. The desert hordes had gone into the ground again, and the wind-shaken heat had regained its still hold on the town, pressing up from the earth, heavily filling the dark tropical sky. Outside Mrs Beresford-Jones's house, adjoining Sir William Carter's, the massive river, now risen with the turbulent waters of the distant summer rains, flowed swiftly, but still in silence, with an eerie quiet blackness spreading out in the night and only broken on the edges with the corkscrews of light thrown upon it by the embankment street lamps under the huge banyan trees. Half a mile across the blackness a few fragile spirals of green and red, reflected from the dockyard lights, showed the limit of the water. Occasionally a whiff of hot vapour floated over the bank, and overhead the brilliant African stars speared the thick darkness from their clean depths.

A few cars had already collected outside Mrs Beresford-Jones's house: the usual V-8 Fords and Morris 16's, a trekking van which Sir William recognised as belonging to the commandant of police, and the antique Rolls-Royce, which had originally belonged to the palace but, after doffing its coat of regal red and changing hands several times, had been acquired by the chief physician for the sum of sixty pounds at the auction sale of a bankrupt Greek grocer.

Sir William, in white dinner-jacket and black cummerbund over his slight tropical middle-aged spread, mopped his forehead as he crossed the few yards between the two gates, over which the now flowerless bougainvillea drooped its tired leaves. He was already sweating again, though he had only just had his after-tennis shower. The sound of talk and laughter reached him over the wall from the Beresford-Jones's front lawn. He could see in his mind the familiar picture long before he passed the hedge of tamarind flanking the drive and came physically on the scene. He was in good spirits. The Council meeting in the morning had gone well after an awkward beginning. The Governor-General had in the end come down definitely on his side; and he had stayed for a few minutes after the meeting and told H.E. about Sheikh Ayyoub's son, and there again he had carried his point. Sir George

had agreed to mention it himself to all heads of departments and impress upon them, and through them upon their staffs, the need to treat the matter naturally. "And if they are incapable of doing that, at least tactfully," Sir William had added, "and without overt animosity." And Sir George had said "Quite", and also volunteered to see the Bishop, before that turbulent prelate made any of his awkward pronouncements, which often got the Administration into trouble with Moslem opinion. Only one point worried the Chief Secretary. Apparently the news had leaked out. Rex Martin told him at lunch that somebody had received a letter from Sheikh Ahmed Suleiman in England mentioning the marriage of Amin Shendi to an English girl who was related to the Viceroy of India! That was unfortunate. Sir William did not want it to become the subject of gossip until H.E. had given his directive.

He made his entry in his usual informal, slightly jaunty manner, and with a circular grin on his face. It was a trick of his gait, the throwing of his weight with little jerky sideway springs from leg to leg, that gave his walk this air of jauntiness.

Lady Jupiter saw him coming towards her across the lawn, and sent out a very gracious smile to greet him, a deft beam that made its way between several intervening faces, including those of the two men she was talking to at that instant. Remembering that he had failed to come to her last party, she had been watching the entrance for some time, noting with resentment that forty-five minutes had passed since the arrival of the first guests. Then she had seen the sideway-jerking figure carrying the circular grin, and purred with gratification. The party would have no prestige gaps. The Major-General was already there, and Sir George Campbell's daughter Marjorie, but Sir William, Number Two in the country, eccentric bachelor, not very social, had the highest snob value.

"So nice of you to come, William," she said, holding out the long bare arm hinging out of the low-necked jade gown which matched her eyes. "I know how busy you are and that nobody has the right to expect you at a frivolous cocktail palaver, but I promise it'll do you good." She had an aquiline face above a figure of generous but manageable proportions.

"As a matter of fact," he said maliciously, "you'd be surprised how idly I spend most of my evenings. Last night I was reading Agatha Christie."

She hated him for ruining the effect on the bystanders of her opening remark. She never knew where she stood with him, whether he was just obtuse and tactless—an old colonial boor—or cruel by intention. And those leering chuckles of his, as though he

had just told a very vulgar story! Somehow she always thought of him telling vulgar stories.

"Oh, how sensible," she said. "I read her myself; it's the only possible literature for this abominable weather. Do have a drink." A servant had just wheeled up, in long white shirt and green belt, offering cocktails and followed by another with whisky and soda in bucket tumblers. Sir William took one of the buckets, then seeing Rex Martin approaching, gave him the faintest wink and turned again to his hostess, saying:

"How did you feel this morning, Maria? Rex and I had a neighbourly feeling for you. Did you and Bunny brave it on the roof?"

"Oh no; I fled to my room. I believe in siege tactics."

"Hallo, William," said Beresford-Jones, joining them. "Did I hear by taking my name in vain?" He was a very thin, and feebly precariously tall, with sandy hair and a walrus moustache. One wondered how the two halves of his body would continue to hold together without the cummerbund; on him the garment looked more like a necessary surgical belt than an ornament.

"Evening, Bunny. How's life treating you?" said Sir William, mentally substituting 'Maria' for 'life'.

"Filthy night, wasn't it?" said Bunny.

"One must admit," said Rex Martin, "that there are times when the white man's burden becomes almost intolerable." And he looked at Sir William.

"And what about the white woman's?" said Lady Jupiter. Then turning to her husband who horizontally occupied half her space, "Could you have borne the load alone, dear?"

"Frankly," said a bright young thing who had come out as a new bride that season, and now had gracefully flitted into the circle round Mrs Beresford-Jones, "I find mine delightfully easy to bear. I think life here is absolutely divine. I even like the sandstorms. Doesn't anybody agree with me?"

"What it is to be young!" said Beresford-Jones, casting a nostalgic rabbit-like look across the years. "By Jove, now that you remind me, I think I did enjoy my first. But I can't say that I shall be sorry to see the last."

"We are going to buy a farm in Kenya, and settle down there," said Lady Jupiter. "You must come and stay with us, William. . . . Darling, do look after the Charltons and that frightened Mrs Wenham. Why is the woman always so timid. . . . Oh, there's Canon Griffith, looking as though he'd just been shipwrecked on a desert island and was hoping to find some heathen to preach to.



Say something to him, Bunny. I'll be coming in a moment."

There were now some twenty or twenty-five guests, circulating or standing about in little islands. Over one island Marjorie Campbell, the Governor-General's daughter, reigned flamboyantly in scarlet, large in body and loud in laughter. At another, the dapper figure of the handsome Major-General, more suggestive of the lounge—some mischievously said of Mrs Charlton's pink divans—than of the battlefield, held the centre of a predominantly female group. Canon Griffith, noticing that Mrs Wenham was, like him, on a desert island, had paddled to her just as Beresford-Jones was setting out on his rescue expedition on behalf of his wife. Seeing that, Lady Jupiter said:

"After all, it seems that our dear Canon prefers to preach to the converted. I think the heathen frighten him . . . don't you, William?"

"They frighten me too," said the Chief Secretary, ". . . the white heathen."

Again she was not sure what he meant. She said:

"But the blacks don't."

"Nor do they Canon Griffith. He lived among them for twenty years."

"Is it true, Sir William," said the bright young thing, Peggy Miller, "that we are soon to have a parliament here, and native ministers, and voting on everything?"

"So I believe," he said, as though he too had heard the rumour and did in part believe it.

"But won't they vote us all out of the country then? And I've only just come out! That's very unkind of you."

"It's no use appealing to him, my dear," said Lady Jupiter. "Sir William trusts the natives, and doesn't care what happens to us. . . . But don't let's start a political argument now. He knows what my views are. . . . One day those of us that are still here will be either kicked out or slaughtered in our beds, unless we put our foot down before it's too late." With this confession of faith which Sir William had heard more than once, Lady Jupiter drifted away to bestow her company on some of the other guests. Sir William also headed for another group with Rex Martin.

The hum of talk and the crackles of laughter went on. Puffs of hot, heavy air smelling of fish drifted in from the river, carrying clouds of minute insects for their one night of festive existence, at the end of which they lay in dead round heaps under the lamps like so much pollen. The servants continued to wheel with their trays of drinks and toothpicked cocktail sausages. The groups of

guests broke up and re-formed. Canon Griffith found himself standing next to the noisy Marjorie, and the Major-General spoke a few words to the timid Miss Wenham. The talk drifted from the sand-storm to golf and the club swimming-pool, to leave departures and boats and the Varsity cricket match, servants and gardens, the sick and the retiring, and reminiscences and the peculiarities of absent friends.

There was something unreal, fantastic, about it all—this islanded gathering of English men and women on the lawn in the midst of the ocean of African life that surrounded it. Sir William thought of the two lives, acutely conscious of the immense native reality outside and the gulf that divided it from this tiny brittle English island. Then he remembered Sheikh Ayyoub and Sheikh Ayyoub's son and the girl in England who was going to marry him. It was as though the two lives had miraculously reached out across that gulf to one single point of contact.

"Is it true that Sheikh Ayyoub Shendi's son at Oxford is marrying an English girl?" said Bob Wenham. Sir William was again standing in the same group as Mrs Beresford-Jones, which now also included the Major-General, the Charltons, the Millers and Canon Griffith.

"Is he, by Jove?" said Charles Miller. "Who told you?"

"I have it on the authority of my chief clerk, for what that may be worth."

"How perfectly disagreeable," said Lady Jupiter. Then she turned to Sir William, who was standing at some distance from the source of the information, saying something to the Canon.

"William, is this true? Have you heard of it?" She spoke as though fixing the responsibility immediately on the Chief Secretary, as though she had the right to call him to account for anything unpleasant that happened in the country—and also as one sufficiently intimate with him for him not to mind her manner.

"Oh yes," he said. "It is true, Maria. I learned of it from the boy's father this morning, and I mentioned it to H.E." He thought it just as well that they should all know immediately what the official line was going to be.

"And what did H.E. say, if it isn't an indiscreet question?"

"He said he'd like it treated as a perfectly natural occurrence."

"You mean to say he's bringing her here?"

"A bit awkward, isn't it?" said the Major-General. "I mean to say, it's never happened before in this country."

"Exactly," said Lady Jupiter. "I always thought it was such a

relief here that we didn't have any of these deplorable marriages and no half-caste population, as in India or Burma. How unpleasant if that were to begin."

"One marriage," said Sir William, "can scarcely be expected to produce a population."

"Yes, but it's the opening of an ugly door; and in a way one is worse than many. If there are a lot of them, they can mix among themselves, but what are you going to do with an isolated case like that? Would you have them in your house?" The question had been rhetorical, but even before Sir William opened his mouth to answer, she realised with horror that he, of course, might—and next-door to her!

He said, "My house is open to the two races separately; I don't see why their conjunction should make any difference."

"Oh, William, you're impossible!" she said, intimately angry. "You don't even know what sort of English girl he's picked up—some barmaid or even worse!"

"As a matter of fact, she's an Oxford girl."

"My dear William, that mean's nothing nowadays, with all the scholarships that are being given—absolutely nothing. . . . Nobody's going to make me believe that a decent, self-respecting English girl would marry a black man. It isn't natural."

"Believe it or not, Maria," said Sir William, in his turn finding the temptation to play the Uncle Leopold card irresistible, "her uncle was Curzon's private secretary at one time."

Lady Jupiter reeled slightly under the blow, but made a swift and inspired recovery. She said:

"Then she must be a Communist!" Somehow, Naomi Mitchison's novel *You Have Been Warned* had recently fallen into her hands, and she had read it from fascinated disgust; and there she had learned that the Communist wife of an Oxford don had slept with a working-man just to show that she was above class prejudice!

The Major-General, not perceiving the logical sequence that had flashed in Mrs Beresford-Jones's mind, and finding the jump from Curzon to Communism somewhat bewildering, said:

"I don't follow there."

And Mrs Beresford-Jones, who could not be bothered to explain the intricacies of her deduction, merely said: "Oh, it's a fashion at Oxford nowadays."

"Would this be a Moslem marriage?" the Canon asked quietly from his professional angle.

"Hardly, if she is a Communist," said Rex Martin, who had

joined the group, and again he and Sir William exchanged a brief look.

"Who says they are marrying at all?" said Mrs Beresford-Jones. "Would you let her into the country, William, if they were not properly married? After all, Communists don't believe in marriage. Why should it be generally assumed that they will be married when they arrive here?"

"We'll have her marriage certificate checked at the frontier," said Sir William.

"What about Sheikh Ahmed's son?" said Bob Wenham. "He isn't marrying an English girl too, is he?"

"I know you don't agree with me, William," said Lady Jupiter, again trying to give the impression that the disagreements that arose between her and the Chief Secretary were those that could be expected to exist between two persons intimate enough to know and tolerate each other's idiosyncrasies, "but I have always maintained that it is a great mistake to send natives to Oxford. It doesn't do them any good. They only acquire a veneer of Western civilisation, and come back with the worst of the two worlds . . . don't you think so, General?"

"It does seem to work out that way generally. I mean, one saw many cases like that in India."

"I don't see," said Sir William, "why it should be generally assumed that our education has nothing but a veneer to give to other races, or that it is impossible to come back, for a change, with the best of the two worlds. After all, if we didn't believe in that possibility, we should have no business to be here or anywhere else, should we?" He knew mischievously that even Lady Jupiter needed to believe that the British Empire rested on a moral foundation, and it amused him to see her chafing under that dialectical handicap.

About half a mile away from the house of the Beresford-Joneses, the native officials' club garden was filling up as usual at that hour. Some twenty members were already sitting round the marble-topped tables, some in European clothes, some in the long white shirts which were the cool wear of their private hours, with a cloak slung across their shoulders or resting on a chair beside them. A few played tric-trac; others talked or read the newspapers. Most of them drank tea or coffee or lemonade.

The garden itself lacked the opulent space and greenness of the Beresford-Joneses'—partly because the native officials did not enjoy the same privileges as the British, partly because the people of the

country, born and brought up in sun-baked aridity, did not have the same passion for greenery as the nostalgic English, and knew that water and vegetation meant more insects. A few thirsty creepers struggled half-heartedly along the walls, and a number of oleander shrubs stood in the corners and on either side of the entrance, in dry, cracked saucers of earth. There was no lawn, but a low tamarind hedge enclosed the space of bare earth on which the tables and chairs were distributed, and which was sprayed at sunset so that its heat might be quenched and its dust caked.

It was the district judge's habit to drop in at the club two or three times a week for a chat and a game of tric-trac with the province head clerk, Mustapha Effendi. For years the two of them, recognised as the best players in the club, had been playing the game together, without either of them ever dropping the pose, common among tric-trac veterans, of wondering how he could continue so to waste his time by playing with an opponent who was manifestly a dud and never won except by outrageous good luck.

Mustapha Effendi that night was sitting at a table with the senior native doctor of the civil hospital, two accountants from the finance department and the editor of one of the nationalist newspapers in the town. They were in the middle of a heated argument over the Legislative Assembly and the editor's comments on it that morning, when they saw the genial bulk of the district judge rolling down on them from the gate.

"What's the news, brothers?" he asked. "What's the excitement about? I could hear your shouting from the market-place. . . . By God, from the market-place."

"That's nothing," said the doctor, a lanky, loosely constructed person with bony cheeks, a beaky nose and close eyes that beetled from a great depth. "Now that you have joined us, we shall be heard across the river." He cackled a low laugh, feebly jointed like his body. It was drowned by a hearty bellow from the district judge, as he sat down, mopping his large aubergine-like face.

"Didn't I tell you?" said the doctor.

"What was it about, anyway?" asked the judge. "What's happened in the town?"

"Have you read Osman's leading article today?" asked Mustapha Effendi, who was much lighter than the others in colour, older and more urbane.

"The one on the Assembly?" said the judge, puckering. "M'm, I read it." In the suddenly narrowed eyes a cautious judgement was glinting into shape.

"And what did you think of it?" asked the doctor, who at the same moment noticing that the tempestuous Osman was about to break out, turned on him with a peremptory flash of his eyes, saying, "Keep quite, you! Let's hear what Shendi has to say."

"A little too violent," said the judge.

"Didn't we tell you so?" said the doctor.

"Only a little too violent?" said Mustapha Effendi. "By God, too violent by half."

"Yes, a little too violent," repeated the judge, disapproving of the article but not wishing to provoke the editor too much.

"Strange, by God, ye brothers," shouted Osman, his eyes leaping to the counter-attack even before his tongue. "Why too violent? Where is the violence? Isn't it the truth? Aren't they trying to fob us off with another plausible shadow? Let them give us a real Assembly and I will be the first to applaud it. But this puppet-show! No, by God. I'll not let it pass."

"It isn't a puppet-show," said the doctor, whose ascetic face looked stronger in silence than when he spoke and became agitated. There seemed to be no physical power in him to impart strength to any action.

"How a puppet-show," said the urbane head clerk, who was expecting his next big promotion shortly, "when it is going to have full powers over legislation and the budget?" He lifted his glass of lemonade and took a series of big gulps whose spasmodic succession kept his double chin rippling for a few seconds as though a large caterpillar were sliding down his throat.

"All power and glory be to God," said the editor. "Not a puppet-show, when only a quarter of the members are to be returned by direct election, when the indirect elections can be relied upon to return Government supporters, and when the remaining members are to be appointed by the Governor-General! What is the use of your full powers when they are to be exercised by mutton? Tell me that!"

"No, no, Osman, you exaggerate," said the judge with expansive deprecation. "Why should you put the worst possible construction on everything? I want to ask you a question. Do you honestly think . . .?" He brought his mountainous shoulders forward over the edge of the table, like a turret wheeling to bring its guns into position.

"Your extremism is not constructive," said the doctor, slipping in the supporting thrust beside the judge's speech.

"And I am tired of this 'constructive' cliché which Sir William Carter has been clever enough to sell you," said Osman, ignoring

the judge's notice of his question in order to return this barb which could not wait.

"Don't talk nonsense, Osman," said the doctor, feeling the shaft pierce. "Sir William Carter has not sold me anything."

"Great God!" said Mustapha Effendi. "Can't you be quiet for a moment and listen to what Shendi wants to ask you?"

"This is what I want to ask you," said the judge. "Do you honestly think our country is ready at this very moment for universal, direct suffrage? . . . Do you?" The huge frame leaned forward as though preparing to fall on the answer if unacceptable and squeeze the life out of it.

"In the towns, yes," said Osman, effecting a partial retreat before the steam-roller. "Why not in the towns, in all the towns?"

"Ah! In the towns!" said the judge, coming down on the evasion. "All right; I grant you that. Have it in the towns, in all the towns. And what then? Doesn't that leave you with the nine-tenths of the population in the tribes and rural areas? . . . Don't let us blink these realities, brothers." Feeling that he had scored a reasonable advantage and seeking rather compromise than unconditional surrender, the judge withdrew his chest from its advance position and spread himself more comfortably in his chair.

"But why should there be any nominated members at all?" asked the older of the two accountants, an extremist like Osman. "No nationalist will stand for election as long as twelve seats are going to be filled with Government yes-men."

"Why should you assume they'll all be Government yes-men?" said the doctor.

"How can you believe they'll be anything else?" said Osman.

"Because," said the judge, "I don't believe that Sir William Carter is as cynical as you imagine . . . or as crude."

"You and your Sir William!" said Osman. "That man is more dangerous than all the uncammouflaged imperialists put together. With the others at least you know where you stand. . . . Give me an enemy that I can trust myself not to trust, every time!"

"Well, you'd better drink your tea before it gets cold," said the judge, emitting a tolerant, stand-easy laugh over the doctor's excitement. He did not like becoming too deeply involved in these arguments. He was a judge. He had to think of his position, and he was by nature a moderate, a man of compromise. On the other hand, he had to be careful not to become branded by the nationalists as a Government stooge.

"And what about your game?" asked the doctor. "Or aren't you going to play tonight?"

"Play with whom?" asked the judge, looking ostentatiously around the garden. "Is there anyone who can play here this evening?" Then he suddenly awoke to the presence of Mustapha Effendi, and fixing him with a confidential look, asked: "Have your moves improved since last time, Mustapha? Shall we try them this once more?"

"Listen, oh you bystanders, to this quack," said Mustapha Effendi, looking round the company. "I call you all to witness. Who was it won two virgin rubbers running on Friday? Hadn't he better play with a few beginners of his class before I take him on again? . . . Upon my word, I pity him."

"Come then, you braggart, let me give you a lesson in who is deserving to be pitied," said the judge, clapping his hands for the familiar box, in which the counters and the dice could be heard rattling as the servant brought it along. The others made room for the two players at the opposite ends of the table, and the game started—the warming shake of the dice in the fist; the deft, purposeful fling; the whacking and smacking of the counters on the board when the throw was propitious or inspiration hit on some masterly combination likely to baffle the enemy; the teasings and boastings that rose from the two camps alternately as the fortunes of the battle swayed. Mustapha Effendi sat calmly, suavely, holding the board with the motion of his eyeballs only, while the judge's head, very nimble on the towering shoulders, darted in quick nervous movements.

The judge won the first game, and as they were rearranging the counters for the second, the doctor said:

"Is this rumour true, Shendi, that your brother Amin is marrying an English girl from Oxford?"

"Ah! Who says that?" said the editor, astonished at the news and annoyed that the doctor should have picked up a rumour before him.

"By God," said the judge, with a laugh in which amusement was subtly blended with a mild deprecation, "he says so himself!" And he seized a little pillar of five counters, and with one flick spread them out into a horizontal line in the appropriate house.

"That, by God, is news!" said the editor. "And for how long have you been hiding this secret?"

"It's no secret, and I haven't been hiding it. I only knew this morning. A letter came from him to my father yesterday."

"And what did your father say?" asked the doctor.

"What is there for him to say? He didn't like it very much at first—nor did I. But what can we do? It's his own look-out." He



felt a certain awkwardness, not knowing exactly what line to take, and was particularly afraid of the reaction of the editor with his extreme nationalism, but Osman surprised and 'relieved him by saying at once:

"Why shouldn't he marry an English girl if he wants to?"

"Praise be to Allah, you don't see in it an anti-nationalist act," said the judge, laughing with good-humoured irony; "for by God, I was afraid of you, Osman."

"Of me?"

"Yes, of you and of your teasings about my becoming a brother-in-law of the British Empire!" The elephantine masses shook with the delight of this confession, and a general laugh went up.

"That's nothing to do with politics," said Osman with a broad-minded gesture.

"How could I tell with you?" said the judge. "You hate the English so much."

"I hate the English who come to our country to boss and despise us. But an English girl who marries one of us must be different. I admire her. I welcome her. It's her people here who won't like it. Mark my word, she won't get a warm welcome from them."

"Did you say she was educated at Oxford?" asked Mustapha Effendi.

"So he says. They were fellow students; that's how he got to know her."

"She must be a girl of high attainments, then," said Mustapha Effendi, impressed, "and of good family. Have many of the English ladies here been educated at Oxford?"

"Only a few," said the doctor.

Throwing his dice and banging his counters in redoubtable onslaughts on the suave head clerk, the judge sensed that they all—even Osman for all his fierce nationalism—felt, like him, that this marriage brought them a certain honour, a sort of concession of equality which flattered them—not a meaningless abstract concession, but a concession by the most intimate and significant implications. And though it was by the act of a single individual, it seemed somehow to involve all the English people in the country.

Having defeated Mustapha Effendi by two rubbers, the judge slammed the two halves of the tric-trac box together with a bang of finality which brought the counters clattering to rest, threw his chest back into the posture of an inaccessible mountain and said:

"The conclusion of the argument is that you don't know how to play." And he aimed from the remote peak a look of pitiful commiseration at his friend.

"You call loading the dice play?" said Mustapha Effendi, maintaining an exterior of unruffled dignity. "A child could win if he got every throw he needed. The real art"—he presented it to the judge poised precisely on the tips of his thumb, index and middle finger pressed together—"the art of which you don't begin to have an inkling in spite of all the lessons I have given you, is to make the best move whatever the throw is, and whether you win or lose is of no consequence—no consequence at all. Or what say you, brothers? . . . Boy! Fetch me another glass of lemonade."

"And a couple of aspirins!" shouted the judge, rollicking and getting up to go. "The Bey has a bad headache!" Always when he beat him, he bestowed upon him this honorific title.

The judge had not seen his father since the morning and did not know the result of the interview with the Chief Secretary. He thought he would drop in on his way home to find out. In his heart he had no doubt about the result. He knew Sir William Carter and trusted his reactions, just as he trusted him about the Assembly . . . occasionally he wondered whether he was too trusting, whether he and the moderates were wrong and the extremists like Osman were right. The extremists believed that the moderates were self-interested because they were all doing well in the Government, getting something out of the British. He did not believe that was true, not true of him and the doctor. But sometimes he wondered whether, because of their better personal relations with the British and the recognition they had won in the service, they did not tend to accept the British point of view too readily. Was that because they had been seduced, or, rather, because they had not become warped by bitterness, like many of the extremists?

He found his father with his mother and two sisters in the inner courtyard of the harem. They sat on two low palm-matted beds, each covered with a Shirazi rug, his father in his long white shirt, unbuttoned down the front to cool his chest, his mother in a white patterned dress with a calico scarf on her head and shoulders, the girls in coloured short dresses, with uncovered heads swinging their screens of slender parallel plaits as they moved. Aisha, the younger, a pretty girl of fourteen, wore an amulet on her left arm, and Fatima, plain and two years older, a silver anklet. They were all drinking mango syrup in large tumblers clinking coolly with the blocks of ice from the new frigidaire.

His father told him what Sir William had said, and then handed him a sheet of paper, saying:

"Here is the letter I have written to him. Read it, and when you go home write to him yourself too. Now that we know the

Government has no objection, we must make him give up this nonsense of not returning home."

The judge put on his glasses and gave the letter a puckered scrutiny, grunting his approval at the end of each paragraph.

"Very good. Very reasonable," he said; then he turned with a large quizzical smile to his mother. "And what does my mother say, eh?" he asked. "Are you prepared to receive an English daughter-in-law?"

She was a meek, quiet woman, with a tired, slightly sad look in her thin face. She said, "What would you have me do now? If he brings her we shall give her welcome, but maybe our welcome will not be to her taste. What do I know of the women of the English and their ways, my son?"

The two girls giggled, and in Aisha's eyes there was a bright excitement. Fatima said, "Will he wed her there, or will her people bring her to be wed here in our house?"

The judge threw his head back, as he always did to relish a huge joke, as though to digest it better, and gave a long, merry roar.

"And have her feet hennaed," he said, still laughing as he projected his sister's thought in his mind, "and be swathed in calico, and scream when he went in to her. . . ." Each image brought forth a fresh explosion, as in a volcano gone wild with merriment. Then he calmed down through decreasing peals, saying indulgently, as though forgiving her for making him ache with so much laughter, "God make you scarce, oh Fatima. . . . No, your sister-in-law would not care for a wedding like that. They will marry where they are."

"A marriage of Christians in church?" asked his mother.

"Even the Christians don't always marry in church nowadays," said her son. "Many of them just sign a contract in a government office, more like our marriage. It is a civil marriage, and people of any religion can have it."

"Is she truly English?" asked Aisha, turning her head suddenly so that the level tips of her hundred plaits spun like a dancer's skirt. "I mean, like Miss Bannerman and the District Commissioner's wife?" Somehow she could not see her brother married to either her headmistress or Mrs Arbuthnot, who taught part-time at the school, and they were the only two Englishwomen she knew.

"Even like them, I suppose. How would you like to have Miss Bannerman as your sister-in-law?"

She laughed in amusement at the absurdity of the thought, and in excitement at what seemed to be its realisation. She said, "What

is her name? Shall we be able to call her by her name like we call each other? Will she really be a sister to us, and come here and talk to us as we are talking now?"

And again she laughed, and her sister laughed too, excited and incredulous and a little afraid.

"We shall see when they come," said Sheikh Ayyoub. "If they come."

"Will they stay with us, before they get a house for themselves?" asked his wife timidly.

Sheikh Ayyoub said, "The house is large enough and lacks nothing, but they may prefer to go to a hotel." It hurt the old man even to consider this alternative. All his instincts and traditions revolted at such a possibility, and he was proud of his enlarged and modernised house, with the new bathroom and frigidaire and wireless; but like his wife he doubted their ability to act the hosts to an Englishwoman, and still more feared that she might not like to come into such intimate contact with their life. It occurred to him that he would not be able to wash his feet over the edge of the verandah if there was an Englishwoman in the house.

"That can all be decided when we know that they are coming," said the judge.

"If they wish to come here," said his mother, "they could have the large room on the south verandah. But you must see if there is everything in it an Englishwoman would need. You would know about that; I don't."

The merry volcano erupted again. He said, "The hell I would. Do you think I pass the time of day in the bedrooms of English females?"

She laughed, saying, "I meant, my son, that you know the world, you know what their houses are like, and you read books."

"I have seen Miss Bannerman's room," said Aisha, feeling that she had suddenly become important. "There is a table with drawers in it and three mirrors on top; one in the middle and one on either side that you can swivel. We must get one like that, and they could have on it the cover I made with the Turkish stitch."

"Perhaps," said Sheikh Ayyoub, "we should also have another servant, a properly trained boy to serve at table." He was conscious that though the house had been modernised, their domestic arrangements were still rather primitive. The servants they had were family retainers—an old woman who had been his father's slave and stayed on after her emancipation in the early days of the new

régime, and Fadel-el-Mula, a feeble-minded man who was a distant poor relation; very useful both, but not very clean, not smart and trained to serve Europeans. Sheikh Ayyoub could not imagine Fadel-el-Mula in a green belt.

### CHAPTER III

WHEN Sheikh Ahmed and his party returned to the country, Badriya went to her father's house to stay there till the wedding.

Mahmoud could see her at her father's house, but not alone. Her mother and grandmother would always be there, not to mention sisters and cousins. Nor could he take her out. All this he had known before they arrived, and it was not this temporary segregation that irked him, but something else: the feeling he had the moment they arrived that they were now in a different environment, and the hideous certainty that came with it that nothing would ever again be the same. Even as they arrived at their house and the assembled women of the family who had come to welcome them raised their greeting of shrill lulus from behind the wall, he felt that Badriya had slipped from his grasp into theirs. He had not heard this luluing of the women for many years, and it smote his ears with a fresh revelation of its significance. It was, as he mostly remembered it, an invisible noise—the noise of women herded behind a wall, a song of joy, but from blind birds in a cage.

His mother had not changed much in the past two years. She still sat on her palm-matted bed under the electric fan, surrounded by cushions, drinking her coffee. Her movements were a little heavier, her absences from the bed less frequent and her panting in the heat a little more noticeable, but the quaint, shrewd smile which he had always liked had not dulled.

"Praise be to God, you have finished your studies and come back home for good," she said. "Praise be to Him, I have lived to see you return." Then the old smile lit up her fat face and she added, "And praise God, too, you haven't brought us an English wife, like Sheikh Ayyoub's son. They say he's coming with her soon."

"She is a very nice girl," said Mahmoud.

"As nice as Badriya?" she asked, giving him a slanting wink.

"No," he said, thinking of Badriya on the grass at Sevenoaks.

"She's a lovely girl, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"And you should see the fluster poor Sheikh Ayyoub and his wife are in . . . they are turning the house upside down. Don't

know what to do for this Ingilizia who is coming to them. I saw Sheikh Ayyoub's wife yesterday and asked her if she hadn't started to learn English!" She laughed with naughty amusement, a rich, slow laugh that rippled away gently, leaving two tears at the corners of her eyes.

"You see," said Sheikh Ahmed, shedding his benevolence on the reunion of mother and son, "here is your son come back to you, a graduate of Oxford, but not an Ingilizi. Look at him; as black as when he went! And he still remembers a little Arabic." He had forgotten his first anxieties in England, the fiasco of the examination and that terrible day at the hospital. The fiasco had been honourably retrieved. Mahmoud had been granted an *egrotat*. And lately there had been no doubt of his glad acceptance of his wife. All had ended well.

There was a great bustle in the house—the unpacking, the deployment of the presents and the endless things Sheikh Ahmed had brought with him. The pistache-green Hillman saloon, the grand piano and the new set of upholstered chairs and settees from Maple's, together with the Crown Derby dinner-and-tea-service and the cut-glass set, were still ploughing the high seas in their bulky crates; but the smaller, unbreakable articles had all been packed in the luggage, and could be quickly extracted for Um Mahmoud to see. Sheikh Ahmed opened one suitcase after another and produced linen, silver, bath towels, clocks, ash-trays, paper-knives, cushion-covers—everything that had caught his fancy on his many visits to Harrods and Selfridges. As the conjurer's cavalcade proceeded, littering tables and chairs, Um Mahmoud said, "Nice, very nice; may God bless and multiply your pennies." He explained the uses of many things which were new to her, and lastly he put before her, with a proud and cryptic smile, a huge sparkling silver bee standing firmly on its legs.

"What's this?" she said, picking it up. "A bee! A monster of a bee. What is it for?"

"What do we get from bees?" he asked.

"Honey."

He inserted a nail into the giant insect's back and lifted a lid, exposing a substantial cavity.

"You will get it from here," he said. "It is for the table." And they both laughed in great delight.

For his wife he had brought an expensive diamond ring and three pieces of silk, but he kept them till the very end. When he slipped the ring on her finger, she said, "It is too lovely for me; I am an old woman now. Why don't you give it to Badriya?"

"This is for Badriya," he said, producing a similar ring from his pocket. "I shall give it to her on her wedding-day." Then turning round to make sure that Mahmoud was out of the room, he added, "We must fix that for very soon; your son is getting very impatient, he's so pleased with the girl now!"

There were also presents for the near relatives and some friends, and the servants got a pound each.

The news spread quickly that Sheikh Ahmed and his son had returned. A kind of verbal rediffusion system operated in the town whereby the news of arrivals, deaths and other sudden social phenomena reached almost everybody by the evening of the day of their occurrence. Many friends had met them at the station, but that did not render a congratulatory visit to the house unnecessary, and there were hundreds of acquaintances who must also come as soon as they heard. In the town there was no social hierarchy, no rigid boundaries between different income or culture levels. Everybody who was not 'rabble' knew everybody else, and important private events were often like a public function in which everybody participated. If in a house of mourning the people of the deceased were of modest means, friends and neighbours sent contributions of coffee and sugar to help them cope with the hundreds who came to condole and to whom coffee must be served. Often, chairs and carpets had to be borrowed. Even in Sheikh Ahmed's house it was deemed necessary to import a few extra settees for the occasion, and these with the entire seating equipment of the house were arranged in a large square round the garden and along the verandahs and terraces. All the carpets, too, were brought out at sunset and spread on the terraces, for many of the visitors would prefer to sit on the ground, taking off their red slippers and depositing them with their canes in a heap near the steps as they came in.

Soon after dark they began to arrive, and rapidly the garden filled up. Everybody came. The big merchants and small shopkeepers of the market-place, senior and junior Government officials, the men of religion, the teachers of all the schools, college students who had been at school with Mahmoud, the editors of the five papers, Sheikh Ayyoub and his son, the judge, Mustapha Effendi and Osman and the doctor. About half of them were in European clothes. A few wore beautiful robes and belts like Sheikh Ahmed's. But the rest came in their long white shirts and turbans, with a black cloak carried carelessly across their shoulders. They carried rustic sticks, and on their bare feet wore the traditional red slippers

with the figure-three toe-cap. Even the district judge, who usually wore a suit, came this evening in this native costume, billowing in it freely, saying he had found it too hot to wear anything else.

They sat round the square, in chairs close to one another, and on the verandahs, but even before the chairs filled up some started sitting cross-legged on the carpets, and the heap of slippers near the edge of the terrace began to grow. Sheikh Ahmed and Mahmoud had to rise constantly to welcome the new arrivals, who might be a solitary walker, or somebody who had just tethered a donkey outside, or a bunch coming out of a car. Some came in quietly, uttering a taciturn perfunctory greeting; others, like the district judge, blew in on a tide of laughter, prepared to wrench your arm out of its socket with the reiterated warmth of their greeting. Trays of lemonade went round, then trays of coffee. The judge was very thirsty, asked for a second bucket-tumbler of lemonade, and under moderate pressure from Sheikh Ahmed, took a third, saying by way of apology, "A curse upon onions and garlic. . . . God forgive you, Osman, for that lunch you gave us!" The spectators watched the three glassfuls vanish in the immense interior, poured in rather than gulped.

Not many people from the country had visited England. One or two deputations had gone there on political missions, but Sheikh Ahmed and his son were the first to have had the experience as private individuals. Everybody wanted to hear from them something about it. Nor was Sheikh Ahmed's anxiety to impart less than theirs to receive. He imparted lavishly; and from time to time, summing up each item, he said:

"Beyond doubt, a great country and a great people."

"Don't they despise a black skin?" asked Mustapha Effendi.

"By 'God, I came across nothing but courtesy wherever I went. They're very decent to foreigners. We stayed at the Savoy Hotel, the greatest in London, and had the best treatment you could imagine. Also in the shops, at railway stations, everywhere. . . . No, no. They are a very polite people in their country."

"In their country," said a young nationalist, with significant emphasis.

"But one hears of incidents," said Osman, ". . . black men being refused admission to hotels or restaurants. It happens quite often."

"You are thinking of America," said the doctor, "and of South Africa. I don't think England is like that."

"It happens sometimes in England," said Mahmoud. "It never happened to me, but I heard of cases. It is rare though, and funnily enough it never happens to anybody in native costume, because



they think he is a prince or something. It is only black men in European clothes who come across it." There was a general laugh, and one of the contingent in traditional robes said:

"How splendid! Then we should all be princes there!"

"Perhaps," said the doctor, "they mistake black men in European clothes for American negroes."

"And why should they be prejudiced against American negroes in England?" asked Osman.

"They've caught the infection from their American cousins," said the judge. "They think because they are despised in America, they must be inferior."

Sheikh Ayyoub cleared his throat and, turning in his chair, expectorated a bullet into the saucer bed of a lontana shrub a few paces away. Then he said, addressing Mahmoud, "But you and Amin at Ixford, you were treated exactly like the sons of the English, isn't that so?"

"Of course," said Mahmoud. "At the college, in the university, there was no difference at all, and we had many good friends, though some of the students were not too keen to mix with us, and in the town one met sometimes people that were not very agreeable, but it did not worry us. Mr Barry, the headmaster of the English school, had warned us about it in a nice way before we went there. He told us, 'You must know that there are stupid people in England as everywhere else, and that one form of their narrow-mindedness is a dislike of foreigners, particularly if their colour is different from their own. You must not mind it. These people are not worth bothering about.'"

"Admirable and beautiful words," said Mustapha Effendi.

"No doubt about it; a great people in their country," said Sheikh Ahmed.

"Why don't they stay in their country, then, and leave other people alone?" said Osman, *sotto voce*, but Sheikh Ahmed heard him. He said, "By God, Osman, if you want the truth and not its cousin, they are a great people even here. Leave nonsense and newspaper talk aside; this is the truth, and we still need them."

"True, true," said a number of voices from nodding heads.

"But will they know when we have ceased to need them, brothers? That's the crux and that's the trouble. They won't. Have you heard of their ever doing it anywhere?"

"Let us wait till then," said Sheikh Ahmed. "If they don't, and you come out with your gun, I will come out with mine, and for every Englishman you kill, I will kill five."

"But in the meantime," said Osman, "you are standing for the Assembly?"

"Maybe."

The judge, who knew both Sheikh Ahmed and Osman well, sensed the rumblings of a storm, and thought it best to divert the conversation from this political channel. He said, "What were the things in England that struck you most, the things that one going from here would find least familiar?"

Sheikh Ahmed told them about social discipline and honesty, about queues and punctuality, and how the newspaperman trusted you to buy your paper in his absence and drop your coin in an open box in the street, which nobody thought of rifling. And he told them about the London police and the traffic and the Underground, and the uncanny precision of a balance in the Bank of England which could register the weight of the ink used in writing a single word on a sheet of paper. Then he laughed and said, "But this is all nothing. Do you want to know what was really the most amazing thing I saw in England? . . . It was a camel with two humps!"

An uproar of excited exclamations, questions and adjurations by Allah greeted this astounding statement. All the rest they had accepted without question, in silent marvelling, because it was not of their world—but the camel! Why, they knew everything there was to be known about camels, yet they had never seen one with two humps. The thing could not exist; and in spite of Sheikh Ahmed's solemn assurances and repeated descriptions of the dromedary he had seen at the London Zoo, some of the older visitors left without entirely surrendering their scepticism.

Sheikh Ayyoub and his son, wanting to see Sheikh Ahmed and Mahmoud alone for a few moments, contrived to stay until all the others had gone. The evening, now fairly advanced, had let off the first great puffs of heat coming from the ground and was beginning to cool. A large silver moon hung above the garden and terraces, incredibly near in the open sky. When the last pair of slippers had been shuffled on again, the last stick picked up, and the last 'May the morning find you well; praise God for your safe return' been uttered at the gate, the judge turned to Sheikh Ahmed, saying:

"We shan't keep you long, Uncle Sheikh Ahmed. It is now late, and you must be needing to rest, both of you. But my father wanted to have a word with you alone."

"It is about Amin, my son, and his wife," said Sheikh Ayyoub awkwardly. "We thought maybe Mahmoud knew her. We

thought he might be able to tell us something about her."

"I knew her very well," said Mahmoud. "She is a very fine girl; pretty and intelligent and very agreeable."

"Thank God for that," said Sheikh Ayyoub, and Sheikh Ahmed added his own testimony, saying what a good impression she had made on him when she came with Amin to the Randolph.

"And will she then, you think, not be proud and difficult to please here, among us?"

"My father wants to know," said the judge, coming to the point, "if you think it will be all right for her and Amin to stay with them in the house when they first arrive. . . . What do you think, Mahmoud?"

"I think she will be glad to," said Mahmoud. "She told Miss Bannerman she wanted to enter into our life, that she wanted to be one of us when she came here, not one of them."

"That shows she is not proud," said the judge.

"Ay, it shows that," said Sheikh Ayyoub. "It shows she is a nice person. But she doesn't know what our life is like. Pray God it may be all right. Thank you for what you have told us."

"Well," said Sheikh Ahmed, after they had seen Sheikh Ayyoub and his son to the gate, "glad to be back? . . . There is nowhere like the old place, after all, is there?" He put his arm round Mahmoud's waist as they walked back.

"No," said Mahmoud, "there isn't." And one half of him felt this truth poignantly, meant every syllable of it. In that half of him there was a warm, overflowing happiness at being back home. Everything around him touched him with its sweet, startling intimacy from the past. Sights and sounds long forgotten leapt back at him from every corner of the house and garden; from outside, from the sky, fresh with the preserved messages of his childhood—the Moorish arches of the verandah, carved white and hard against the burning blue of the afternoon, now hugging the moonlight softly, the flashing peep of Sirius through the middle arch when you stood on the steps, the jasmine-bush at the gate, the grey and silver geometry of the mud walls around them.

And he was warmed by the gathering of people they had just had, by seeing the familiar shapes and faces sitting round their garden in that easy, friendly intercourse, by the sight of the piled-up red slippers and canes. It was all so warmly, so unstiffly human—a close, simple old-world community, rustic in flavour though in a town, not yet broken up, not yet frozen by industry and excessive urbanisation. The judge, though a senior official, could

still come in his white shirt, loose turban and red slippers. Mahmoud had noticed that when the hour for the evening prayer had come, several of the older men, not wishing to postpone the devotion, as they could have done, until they went back to their houses, retired to a corner of the verandah, where water was brought them for washing, and prayed, standing in a row, bending and kneeling and touching the ground with their foreheads in unison, while the other visitors went on talking only a few paces from them.

He was happy to be reabsorbed into all that, as though without knowing it he had been missing something all the years of his absence. Here one could not be lonely, not as one could in the West. And though the Westernised individual in him who prized privacy warned coldly of the drawbacks of this life to which he was returning, his instincts in the first flush of homecoming thrilled at its good-fellowship, which flowed from house to house on all occasions of joy or sorrow.

He had not thought of Badriya much during the evening when the visitors were there, but when he went up to sleep on the roof he saw her house which was not far from theirs, and its very nearness brought back to him that sense of distance from her which he had felt on their arrival. The gathering in the garden with all its good-fellowship was itself a reminder of that. It was, as these warm-hearted gatherings always were, a gathering of men. His mother, the women, were always behind the wall; and Badriya's roots grew from behind that wall. Could she really live on this side of it with him? Could he uproot her?

Outside him there was no cloud on the serenity of the night. It was limitlessly serene, as moonlight nights could be only in his country. The boundaries of the world seemed dissolved. Solidity itself melted into an infinite dream of silvery light and peace. He took off his pyjamas and lay naked and uncovered on the white cool sheet, his skin sensing the feathery motion of the air. His eyes, looking up, saw nothing but the infinity of the moonlight and the few bright stars that lived in it. He was conscious of nothing, in any direction, between his bare body and the ends of space, and the only sound he heard from the sleeping, low-roofed city was the barking of dogs. A sense of tremendous freedom, a peace deeper than all troubles, filled him and he fell asleep.

After breakfast the next morning he went to see Badriya. The town had not changed much. Sumptuous houses, like his father's, were still freak growths in primitive streets, standing out abruptly from among clusters of old ramshackle mud houses with small

high windows and unpainted crude timber doors, outside some of which scraggy chickens pecked in the gravel of the road. There was no colour in these streets except the occasional green or blue window squinting off-squarely in the mud walls. The colour of mud, of bare earth and gravel, prevailed desolately in street after street, and there was little shape either. It seemed rather as though the houses were lumps and deformities which had grown out of the ground, arid and colourless like it. If England was grass, grass, grass, this was dust, dust, dust. But the severe melancholy of it had a strange appeal of pathos and almost dignity.

It was only a day since he had parted from her, but it seemed an age, and he walked quickly in the rising heat of the morning across the few hundred yards between their houses.

Badriya was with her mother and one of her married sisters when he arrived, and he sat with the three of them in the harem. She sat silent, subdued, not looking at him. The room reeked with the strong oily scent of the women's hair. He looked at their plaits and saw the fatty shine on them; knew that if he touched them his fingers would become greasy. And he knew that Badriya's hair would soon be like that. Then his eyes dropped from the unpainted plaits to their owners' feet, and saw above the edge of the red slippers, just where he expected it, the peeping dark fringe of the hennaed sole.

He tried to make general conversation, but found it very difficult. His uncle's widow and her married daughter were stiff, had no humour like his mother, and they seemed to be in awe of him. He prayed for some occasion that might take them both out of the room for a moment so that he might say a few words to Badriya, feeling it imperative to re-establish some communion with her. Only twice had he been able to look into her eyes, and neither time had she even smiled.

Soon the mother went out to bring the coffee, and while she was away the married sister's little boy, playing out on the verandah, began to cry and call his mother, so that she too left the room. But even then, Badriya did not look at Mahmoud quickly as he had hoped, and when he said, "Why don't you look at me?" she answered awkwardly, giving him only a half glance, "Here it's not like there."

"I know things are not like there," he said, "but you and I must not be different."

"Everything is different," she said.

"It won't be when we are married. We'll live then as we like. We'll go and bathe in the river at the farm in the early morning."

She gave a little laugh of startled, incredulous amusement; and he knew that the incredulity was not because she thought he did not mean it, but because she could not see herself doing it.

Then he heard the clinking of coffee cups on a tray, and knew the mother was coming back. There was so much he still wanted to say, but there was no time for more than one or two more words. He said:

"Badriya, don't let them grease your hair. I don't like it."

"But how?" she said. "The hairdresser is coming to do it this afternoon."

After taking a few sips of his coffee, he said to the mother, "Auntie, I like Badriya's hair to stay as it is, as it was in England. I shouldn't like it to be greased."

"But how can that be, my son?" she said. "When it is combed it must be greased. The scent is in the grease."

He did not want to wound her feelings by telling her that he had come to abhor the scent too, the scent particularly, because it was the scent of the harem. He merely said, "I prefer it like this."

"But, my dear, have you ever seen a girl whose hair wasn't anointed? She can't be different from all other girls. And the grease is good for the hair. You will see how you will like it when it has been done. It will be much nicer than now—like strips of velvet."

He went straight back to his mother. He felt he must put up a fight right away, because it was so important that what had started in England should continue without a break.

"Have you been to your uncle's house?" asked his mother, and when he answered her she noticed the irritation in his manner. She said:

"Your father and I have been talking about the date of the wedding. Your father thinks the first Friday of next month. All the preparations could be made by then."

He sat in a chair facing her and said, "I want to talk to you about that."

"What has made you angry?" she said. "People don't talk about their weddings with a scowl like that on their faces."

"Listen, Yamma. I want my marriage, my married life, to be different from what married life is like in our country. I want my wife to be an emancipated woman. I can't be happy with a woman of the harem for a wife. When I first heard of this marriage from my father, I was very unhappy because I thought it was going to be just a harem marriage. But in these two months in England,

Badriya and I have made a happy start, and I don't want that spoilt. I want it to go on as it has begun."

"Nobody is going to prevent you, my son. Your father wants your married life to be modern."

"But our weddings are not modern, and greasing the bride's hair is not modern, and binding her in calico is not modern, and going in to her with a whole crowd feasting outside is not modern. . . . I don't want any of this, and I don't want her mother and sisters to start dragging her back into the habits of the harem. Why can't they leave her alone?"

"But, my son, we don't know any other kind of wedding. These are the customs of the country. How would you have your wedding then? We must have a feast."

"I don't mind the feast. Of course we'll have a feast. But I don't want my wife to be dressed and made up in the usual way. I want her to be as she was in England."

"But she must wear special clothes, special wedding clothes."

"They can be of the same kind she has been wearing . . . and her hair and her feet. I don't want the grease and the henna. And I'd like us both to go away from the house for the night."

"Go away from the house?"

"Yes. I'd like to take her to the farm and stay there a few days. The rest-house at the farm is very nice, and we could prepare it to receive us on the wedding night."

"But you can't do that, Mahmoud. You can't leave your own wedding feast, my son, while the guests are all there, and her people and your people. . . . Why, the whole thing is to celebrate your going in to her. How can you take her away for that?" How indeed! How could he baulk the crowd of that lascivious thrill of the final curtain, when they had waited the whole evening to see the bridegroom go in and to hear the screams of the modest virgin being deflowered against her will! He blurted in his bitter anger:

"I've gone in to her already, mother. There will be no proof of virginity on the wedding night. You'd better be prepared for that."

"Oh, my son, you should not have done that. It was not——"

Sheikh Ahmed, who had just returned from an early morning visit to the farm, walked into the room, saying:

"What's the argument about? What's this stay-at-home idler holding forth on?"

Mahmoud remained silent. His mother, without mentioning his last disclosure, repeated to her husband what he had been saying.

"Listen, lad," said Sheikh Ahmed, casting his speech in a light vein and dismissing his son's objections tolerantly as though they could not have been meant seriously. "In a few weeks' time she will be your wife altogether, and then you can make her live and dress exactly as you please. But the wedding and the preparations for it are not your concern. Even I can't interfere, God knows. Leave them to the women-folk whose job it is. . . . Take her away from the house on the wedding night! By God, her grandmothers, let alone her mother and sisters, would flay you alive for suggesting it. Perhaps your son will be able to do that—eh, Um Mahmoud? But we are not there yet, not quite yet."

"What you want, my son," said the mother, "would give offence to everybody. They wouldn't think your kind of wedding was a wedding at all. Why, I'm more than sure Badriya herself wouldn't like it; she wouldn't feel she was being properly married, like all the other girls."

"And anyhow," added Sheikh Ahmed, "what's the importance of all this? The important thing is that the girl pleases you now, thank God, and that you are happy in one another. Don't let anything else worry you."

Mahmoud began to feel that he had been unreasonable. A deep sense of loyalty to his country, even in its backwardness, and a horror of being snobbish towards its customs merely because they were not Western, stirred in him, reinforcing the pleadings of his parents . . . perhaps his first reaction had been superficial. The one thing he did not wish to be was the African or Oriental who succumbed uncritically to the veneer of Western culture. Despite Oxford, or because of it, he did not want his life to be a copy of the externals of Western life. Through this reasoning, and subject to a secret compact he made with himself, he became reconciled to the prospect of the traditional ceremony.

Unlike Mahmoud, Badriya was not provoked by anger into revealing the secret of the honeymoon they had had. She revealed it one day, to the younger of her two married sisters, from bravado. She had never had any secrets in her life before, never known the thrill of confiding to someone unique and startling knowledge about something that had happened to her—never been in the position, when her married sisters were talking about mysteries that still lay ahead of her, of showing herself unexpectedly their equal in the substance of experience and their superior in the novelty of its form, as she was that day when Khadija, with much teasing and sniggering, was talking to her about her coming wedding.

"I know all about it," said Badriya.



"Don't be silly, you don't know anything. To learn about it from others is not the same as when it happens to you."

"I know just as much as you."

"Listen, in the name of God! What do you know, child, before you are married, before your man goes in to you?"

"If I tell you something, will you swear not to tell my mother?"

"Why should I tell her? What is it?"

"Swear by the Prophet you won't."

"All right, I swear by the Prophet."

Badriya told her.

"Oh, you little fool," said Khadija, more piqued by the sudden obliteration of her superiority than shocked by the immodesty of what she had heard. "You shouldn't have done that. You shouldn't have let him. It is very improper."

"Am I not his wife already? Why should it be improper? He knows better than you or me, and he said it wasn't. . . . He has learned everything at Oxford."

"Men are always impatient and have no shame about it. But the girl should be modest and not in a hurry. And you may become pregnant and if the wedding is delayed your child will be born long before the time, and everybody will know how immodest you were."

Seeing the sudden look of fear that came into the girl's eyes, her sister relented and added, after doing some mental arithmetic:

"Now that the date of the wedding has been fixed, you are safe. At worst, they'll think it a seven-month baby. . . . How many times, did you say?"

Badriya felt herself slipping rapidly, after her brief moment of swagger, into the position of a culprit under examination. Her confidence in Mahmoud's judgement was shaken. She answered lamely, mumbling.

"But my mother must know, you little ignoramus," said her sister as a new thought struck her.

"You swore not to tell her," cried Badriya in panic. "You swore by the Prophet. You can't tell her. You won't."

"But this is different. I don't want to sneak on you. For your own good, it is necessary that she should know. Don't you understand? There will be no proof that you are a virgin on the wedding night. Mahmoud's mother and grandmother may think the worst of you, if they don't know what has happened."

Khadija left Badriya crying and went to seek her mother. In a moment the two of them came back, the mother clapping her

hands at intervals as she always did when facing a serious misfortune, by way of breaking its shock and invoking the patience needed for bearing it. They found Badriya still sobbing.

"Ignorant child," said her mother to the rhythm of her beating hands. "What have you done? Is it your wish that all the women of the town should point at me for having a girl that knows no modesty?" Then she turned in angry remembrance to her other daughter, saying, "And where was that stupid Miss Barraman all the time? What did she go with them for—she the headmistress of a school too!"

"Leave me alone," cried Badriya. "I don't want to hear your speech."

"Couldn't you hold him off for a few weeks?" continued the mother. "Didn't you know that the girl must never give in so easily? That her man himself will despise her if she does? That even on the wedding night she must resist and scream if she wants to be a respectable woman?"

"Go away," said Badriya. "Don't talk to me."

"But I will talk to you, as also I have got to go and talk to your husband's mother, to my shame."

"Never mind, Mother. You have said enough. Nobody is going to know but my aunt. Leave her alone now." Khadija, having done her duty, was now on the side of the fallen.

"Shut up, you!" said Badriya. "You swore by the Prophet, and you broke your word. You will deserve it if God strikes you dead at this moment!"

"I shan't say any more now," said her mother. "What you have done, you have done, shameless one. But I don't care how many times you let him come to you there, in the country of the infidels; if you don't scream the house down on your wedding night, by God I shall flog you!"

It had not been boastful rhetoric on Sheikh Ahmed's part when he said that he would not mind if he spent a thousand pounds on the wedding. Almost every pennyworth of that promise was made good. Over three hundred invitations in gilt letters were sent out. The local military band was hired. A large marquee with interior richly lined in arabesques of red, white and blue, and decorated with Koranic texts in flowery script, was hired and set up in the open space adjoining the house to take the overflow of guests from house and garden. Half a dozen electricians worked a whole day to spread festoons of coloured bulbs along the verandahs and across the garden. Three Koran chanters were engaged to

recite suitable verses from the Holy Book at intervals throughout the evening.

The preparation of the bride and bridegroom began a whole week before the night of climax. This was the business of the women. They bustled in the two houses from morning till night. Grandmothers, mothers, sisters, cousins, singly or in groups, each had her function to perform.

Each day the bride had to be dressed and coached in her part. This ceremonial was presided over by the grandmothers, while the sisters and cousins looked after the bridegroom with elaborate and varied ministrations. They massaged his arms and legs in the morning. They dressed him in his silk robes. They waited on him at meals. They brought him—with much giggling and teasing—day-to-day and hour-to-hour news of the bride whom he was not allowed to see at this stage of the proceedings.

Each day was a rehearsal starting with a sort of pretence that its preparations were for the real thing, and ending on a note of pretended postponement. "No, not yet!" the sisters and cousins would say. "The bride isn't ready for you. You've got to wait, you poor man." And the next morning it would start all over again, the massaging, the silk robes, the special meals. The girls would report on the condition of the bride, on the progress of her feelings which were not quite ready yet. . . . They would describe the preparations in the bridal house, the accomplishment of each part of the ritual, the purchasing of the henna from the market-place by all the women going together in the singing, luluu procession prescribed for the fetching of the henna.

Mahmoud, having yielded in principle, did not boggle over the details. It was easier to accept them all, to become entirely passive and let the tide flow over him. He let them massage him. He stood patiently while they dressed him. He listened to their teasings and teased them back. And on the afternoon of the wedding day he let them lead him, mounted on a horse, in full bridal regalia, to the bride's house, to the wing reserved for him and his friends, where he had to wait until news was brought him that the bride was ready for him.

He sat in an impersonal mood, as though a spectator at some public function, chatting with his cousins and friends on general matters, listening to the music of the military band and to the chanting of the Koran which alternated with it. Occasionally a third noise broke upon the air, clashing with the music or smothering the chantings for a few seconds. This was the luluu of the assembled women, who thus from across the walls asserted their

invisible but supreme presence. Supreme because the show was really theirs, because they preserved and enforced its elaborate ritual, because however impotent they might be outside the harem, marriage and birth and circumcision constituted for them an empire, which they ruled with a mixture of tyranny and extraordinary cunning—"Imperial Policy", Mahmoud called it. In a land where divorce was very easy for the man, and where the woman had little hold on her husband except sexual appeal, the enchantment and perpetuation of this appeal had become a socially organised art in the hands of the women. The pretence of resistance on the first night was often repeated in various forms throughout married life. The husband must be always made to feel that he had obstacles to overcome. . . . A smile came to Mahmoud's face as, looking at one of his friends in the room, he remembered the obstacles that young man's father had had to overcome once, when the reluctant wife held his desire to ransom for a *tobe* of silk to be delivered immediately, so that a servant had to be sent late in the evening to the merchant's house with five pounds and an earnest request to open his shop just for a moment, as the matter was of some urgency. The merchant had obliged the impatient customer, but had revenged himself for the disturbance of his rest by describing to his friends his client's impetuous passion for silk.

The ordinary guests, the public, did not stay long after the feast. Only family connections and close friends remained. For some time, as the last touches were being put to the bride by the attendant women, the luluing from behind the walls became more and more frequent, indicating the approach of climax. Then it stopped, completely, and the tension grew, as in the hush of an audience at amateur theatricals when the last preparatory noises behind the curtain cease. In the room where Mahmoud sat the electric fan was spinning vigorously, but the sweat poured out of his face. He seemed to hear Pythagoras saying, "You natives!"

"Mahmoud!" said one of his friends. "Don't look so impatient, man; you're nearly there."

"And don't disgrace the male sex, lad," said a big, coarse cousin, "perform your duty like a man."

"By God, it seems that the English have corrupted your manhood, and made you cold-blooded like themselves," said a third. "You sit there as uninterested as if it were somebody else's night of entry."

The big, coarse cousin broke into laughter, saying, "Why, brothers, do they give degrees in this kind of thing at Oxford?"

The luluing broke out again, shrill, critically significant. The bride was ready. She had just been installed in the bridal room. The young men with Mahmoud got up, with more laughter and teasing, and hustled him out. The two mothers collected him and led him to the door. From the harem courtyard the luluing was insistent.

Badriya sat on the bed like a statue. The fluid of life seemed to have gone out of her carved features completely. She looked like a wooden image in a temple, a stage property in the dramatics of some oppressive cult. Her eyes, bent on the floor, did not lift as he entered, and apart from her heaving bosom swathed in its calico, there was no motion of life in the set figure. Set there, he felt, by those luluing producers outside, taught every syllable of her part, mesmerised into it.

Baffled, almost horrified by this suspension of her personality, he did not know how to speak to her. He came and sat on the edge of the bed near her. Without looking at him, she moved away a few inches. He thought to himself, 'Cue number one'. He could almost hear prompting from outside. Were the producers, he wondered, timing it all, knowing when every move would take place? They had made a thorough job of the make-up. The reek of the aphrodisiac ointment was stifling in the hot room; her skin and her hair glistened with their grease. The palms of her hands were burned with henna, and though he could not see the feet he knew that they too had been dyed. To test her promptness on the next cue he reached out for her hand. She withdrew it sharply.

He had already made up his mind that the last act of the play would have to run its course without the Prince of Denmark. Nothing on earth could induce him to make love to her in that setting.

"You don't have to run away from me, Badriya," he said. "I am not going to touch you . . . not tonight. Tonight is for the others, for our people, not for ourselves. But it doesn't matter, does it? Look at me . . . smile! I don't like to see you like this. Let's talk about Sevenoaks and the river, and the time you slipped down the bank and your bathing cap came off."

She looked up and began to smile. Glad, feeling that he had broken through the crust of that absurd dramatisation and won against all those women, he smiled back and patted her hand. But she stiffened again in an instant, and the smile froze out of her face. She looked frightened, lost in an unexpected situation.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She only stared at him. Realising the purport of what he had

said, and that he was not going to give her any more cues, she stared in panic. Gust after gust of fear swept down on her—fear of her mother, who was listening outside; fear of the shame of immodesty, fear of the silence that was growing in the room. Like a wind, the fear blew round inside her, beating against her sides. And the wind swelled suddenly into a crashing storm. She yelled.

Pushing him away from the bed, she screamed and screamed again. And in between her screams he thought he heard the noise of laughter from outside. Then something extraordinary happened to him. His disgust and rage in defeat flamed into desire. The hysteria of her resistance, seeming real, provoked him, smashing his inhibitions, whipping all personality out of him, so that they were now just a man and a woman facing each other unindividualised, in the primitive chaos of passion. Even the sights and scents which had repelled him, stung him with an alluring challenge. His eyes instinctively sought her feet, eager for the thrill of glimpsing the edge of the henna. He forgot that there were people outside.

Only enough individuality remained in him to tell him that the Prince of Denmark had been beaten by the women.

## CHAPTER IV

AFTER Schools, Betty had gone to stay with her father for the few weeks before her *viva*.

Mr Corfield, when he was not travelling abroad, lived in Dorset, where he wrote, fished, sailed and pottered round his garden, surrounded by the many curios he had collected from various countries—tapestries, carvings, china, quaint miniatures, coins, scarabs, ships in bottles and bottles filled with coloured sand in patterns, the Twenty-third Psalm carved on an almond shell in Syriac. In the summer he wore shorts and a panama hat; in the winter, a beret. The only paper he read apart from literary periodicals was the *Manchester Guardian*, and the books he wrote were on travel and country life. Betty had always found him lovable, and she was at ease with him in a manner she had never been with her mother.

On the day after her arrival, she said to him after breakfast:

"Dad, how liberal exactly are you?" They were in his study, where he had been showing her a new book on birds that he had bought, and she asked the question, looking not at him, but at the photograph of her mother on the desk.

"Why?" he asked. "Have you joined the C.P.?"

"No . . . not quite. I don't think I ever shall. I am very sympathetic, but my temperament was not made for that kind of discipline."

"What other enormity have you committed then?"

"I haven't actually committed it yet, but I am going to. . . . Will it shock you very much to know that I am going to marry a black man?"

He looked at her with a quick movement of his head, and for a moment their eyes communicated in silence.

"Does it?" she repeated, quizzing him with a gentle challenge.

"Rationally, perhaps not," he answered at last, implying his startled feelings.

"But emotionally, yes. . . . I understand. Your civilised liberal reason tells you that the colour of the skin is an unimportant result of geography; but your instincts shrink all the same. Isn't that it?"

"It's amazing how well the children of today understand their parents," he said with defensive, not unfriendly irony, gathering his thoughts for what he should say, picking them out from among his feelings, which were still bewildered under the shock.

She laughed, then said, "But you do admit that a black man can be as nice and intelligent as any white man, don't you?"

"Is it that young man I met at Oxford?"

"Yes. You said you liked him very much."

"I did."

"Well?"

"It takes a few minutes to get used to the idea."

"But you will get used to it, Daddy dear? You won't let it hurt you?"

"It isn't a question of whether it will hurt me, my dear; but whether it may not hurt you later."

"I'm doing it with my eyes open. I'm not afraid of the consequences."

"Where are you going to live?"

She told him of the alternatives and of her own inclination.

"Don't you think his own feelings may be a truer guide in this matter than your enthusiasm for something new and daring? . . . You asked me just now whether a black man could not be as nice and intelligent as any white man. Of course he can, but it doesn't follow that you'd find life in his country agreeable. This young man has been to an English school and to Oxford. You're bound to have much in common with him, but his people and his country will be different."

"I shouldn't mind their backwardness. It's not their fault."

"Of course it isn't, but you shouldn't forget that you too have your instincts."

They were silent for a while, then he said:

"Have you thought of the question of children? I suppose you have."

"Of course I have. I shall see to it that they don't grow up in a no-man's-land or with a split personality."

"Will it be in your power to do that? Isn't it the environment that does it?"

"Only if the parents allow it. . . . And the environment is changing, Dad. By the time my children are growing up England will be a Socialist country and her dependencies will either have become independent already or will be swiftly moving that way, and the whole climate of feeling will be different, don't you see, you dear, mild, nineteenth-century liberal?"

Mr Corfield was unable to settle down to writing that morning. His mind in its mild detached way could not drop the subject Betty had launched upon it. Under the panama hat, as he mowed the lawn and weeded the rose-beds, argument and counter-argument, reason and feeling, kept up a steady debate, civilised and cool but also disturbing. He tried to sift the rational from the irrational in his feelings; and he was annoyed to find that even when he put all the reasonable objections aside on the assumption that they could be reasonably answered, there remained an obstinate, irritating residue of psychological aversion. Again and again he tackled it, trying to pluck it out, even as he dug his fork into the ground to lever up the weeds.

What was it that made him feel like that? No, not an æsthetic revulsion from the colour itself; he did not feel that. Obviously, association; because a black skin was associated with primitiveness, with naked savages, with an inferiority assumed to be intrinsic from the days of slavery. But there was nothing primitive or inferior about that young man he had met. Nor could his people be so primitive if they sent him to be educated at Oxford. . . . There, he had eradicated that weed in the same moment as he had wrenched out a monstrous dandelion with a root like a turnip. Yet, the next instant, when he looked back at its place in his heart, it was there again! Ah well, he must not let it bother him. He knew it for what it was worth—conditioned habits of feeling, prejudices. Who could be free from them?

At supper Betty said to him, "Has the shock worn off?" Her green eyes gave him a smile as of dancing waves.



He returned her smile with a look indulgent and shrewd at once, saying, "In the morning you asked me how liberal I was. I should like to ask you a similar question. How much of a Socialist are you, my dear?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're sure that your wanting to marry this young man is more than a political demonstration?"

"Yes, Daddy dear, quite. I wouldn't let ideological fervour take me as far as that."

"Intellectual Socialists can sometimes be as wrong as Colonel Blimp."

"How?"

"When they become romantic about the victims of capitalism and imperialism. . . . Do you know what Anatole France once said to a woman whose objection to spiritualism was that the spirits' messages were always so inane?"

"No."

"He said, 'Il ne suffit pas de mourir, madame, pour devenir intelligent.' I often think that when people start idealising the working class and colonial peoples just because they are the victims of injustice, they lay themselves open to some such correction."

"But I'm not idealising anybody."

"You're sure you don't think that, just because your young man's people are black and a subject race of the British Empire, you're bound to find them nice and likeable?"

"No, of course not. What I am sure of is that they're just ordinary human beings like us—just equals, no better and no worse. Don't you think they are our equals?"

"Intrinsically, of course, but culturally they are still far below our level. . . . You see, that's where I think you are apt to go wrong. Because the Blimps assume a radical, unalterable inequality, you swing to the opposite extreme and deny even accidental and passing inequalities—the inequalities of culture, of ways of living."

"I admit differences and material backwardness, but I don't see that we have any right to assume that the values of their life are inferior to ours all round. In some ways they may be superior. Superior, anyhow, to the kind of life the English live in their colonies. . . . Good Lord, Daddy, haven't you read Somerset Maugham? Don't you think that if I went to Malaya I should be much more at home among the natives than at the clubs of the *Casuarina Tree*?"

They did not have any more discussions on the subject. Mr

Corfield had said the few things he wanted to say, and as the days passed he became used to the idea of Betty's intended marriage. In one corner of his heart he admired his daughter's independence, realising that her unconventionality was only an exaggerated version of his. This had always been a bond between them, a bond which neither of them had had with her mother. Mr Corfield wondered whether if his wife had been still alive Betty would have dared to come home with the piece of news she had brought him alone so light-heartedly. He did not think she would, and it pleased him that his existence did not cramp her freedom. Without any undue perturbation, he went back to his roses and his boat and the book he was writing and the occasional bushing of the invisible Syriac grooves of the Twenty-third Psalm.

Two days before Betty was due to go back to Oxford for her *viva*, she received a letter from the Principal of her college, asking her to drop in to see her afterwards, as she had a message to give her.

Puzzled by this communication, Betty made her way to the Principal's house as soon as the *viva* was over. She had already seen Amin and learned from him about the letters from his father and his brother. "There!" she had said when he translated them to her. "That doesn't leave you a leg to stand on. Your people are much nicer than you wanted me to believe!"

"Well, how did it go?" the Principal asked about the *viva*. "Were they nice to you?"

"They didn't stand up and bow, or anything like that," said Betty, "but they were quite friendly, and it only took a few minutes, which I suppose means that my third or whatever it is had already been comfortably settled."

"I hope a whatever-it-is," said the Principal, smiling. She did not expect Betty to get a first, but according to her tutor's reports she was pretty safe for a second. They talked for a moment about the examinations and other candidates from the college; then the Principal said:

"This message I have for you. . . . First of all, I don't want you to imagine for a moment that I have been prying into your private affairs. I have only come into this as a result of an enquiry I received from a Mr . . . dear me, I've forgotten the name; now, where is it?" She fumbled through some papers on her desk. "Ah, yes! Here it is—a Mr Raymond Turner, writing from a Government Agency in Eaton Square . . . does that mean anything to you?" The Principal asked the question in a very candid and friendly manner, and Betty sensed in the older woman a desire to

be helpful, mixed with a great anxiety not to cause her embarrassment. She said :

"Yes; I think I know what it means."

"It was a curious enquiry," said the Principal. "He was trying to get in touch with somebody who, he thought, belonged to this college. But he didn't know her name. He only knew of one circumstance by which she could be identified, and he wrote to ask me if I could help him. He said he had a communication to make to the person in question, something which it was in her interest to know. I presumed from certain things I had heard that he meant you, but I did not wish to give him any information until I had seen you."

"Thank you very much," said Betty, admiring the superb tact and economy with which the Principal had conveyed her meaning, and feeling grateful to her for something infinitely more delicate and gracious than tact in her manner, something which conveyed that there was nothing offensive in the tact.

"I thought you should receive this message," said the Principal, "and decide for yourself what to do about it. If you wish me to, I will let him have your address, but it is entirely up to you."

"I shall be in London tomorrow; I will go and see him," said Betty, with a look which told the Principal that she was not afraid of hearing whatever communication he had to make to her. For she had immediately sensed a challenge in this message of seeming warning. She decided not to mention it to Amin, lest there might be in it something that would revive his misgivings about their going to live in his country. She would deal with this new obstacle single-handed. If there was going to be any nastiness from the Government she was glad to have a show-down with them immediately; and if they thought they could intimidate or discourage her, she would show them that they were mistaken. She would write to her M.P. about it . . . and what a dirty trick it was to give his father comforting words and then try this backstairs way of keeping her out!

It was therefore in a gladiatorial mood that she went the next morning to call on Mr Raymond Turner. In the twenty hours or so since she had first heard his name, the image of this gentleman had grown consistently more sinister in her imagination, so that by the time she arrived at the Agency she was braced to the ordeal of doing battle with a composite dragon made up of all her pet aversions. This was her first personal contact with the Colonial Empire, and the Colonial Empire still loomed up in her mind as a vast organisation of iniquity. Entering the Agency's portals, she

felt larger than life, involved in issues that were far more than personal. Symbolically, she was the deputy of the Socialist Club assaulting Toryism, the City and Mr Chamberlain.

The friendly, completely ungladiatorial manner in which the Agent received her made her feel slightly ridiculous, but she remained on her guard, determined not to be undermined by superficial courtesies. 'Naturally,' she thought, 'he will try to win his point by being nice to me.'

"I understand you wish to see me," she said. "I saw my Principal yesterday and she gave me your message."

Mr Turner was an elderly man, the post of Agent in London being reserved for the declining years of distinguished former officials. From the moment he received Sir William Carter's letter, he had felt a fatherly concern for the girl he was asked to get in touch with. It was a matter of great delicacy, he thought. She was bound to feel sensitive about it. He was sorry for her and full of misgivings about the future awaiting her, but he had seen Carter's point and agreed with it.

"It was very good of you to come," he said. "I hope it hasn't taken you out of your way." Her pretty looks, the very boldness of her green eyes, had greatly increased his compassion for her in the few seconds since she had entered. As he spoke, a compulsive association of her whiteness with the skin of a black man kept rising in his mind.

"No, there was no inconvenience in it at all," she said. "I happened to be coming to London today." On the wall, behind Mr Turner's chair, there were two pictures of native scenes in the territory—a group of huts, in one, with fat naked black babies playing in the sand around them, and a train of white coaches standing at a station in the background, shimmering in the hot light; in the other, representing a more primitive part of the country, a line of tall, slim, naked negroes of both sexes confronting the river steamer on one of its rare visits to their district. Mr Turner became conscious that Betty was looking at them out of the corners of her eyes, and felt acutely embarrassed. Those, of course, were very backward parts of the country, quite unlike the kind of town life she would be going to, but the nudity of the black figures behind him, impinging in his mind on the whiteness of her skin, bored through the back of his head with a nauseating effect.

He said, "I have a letter for you from Sir William Carter, the Chief Secretary in the Government. Perhaps the best thing would be for me to give it to you to read here, and if there's any further information you'd like to have, I should be very glad to give it to

you. Sir William, of course, didn't know your name when he wrote this letter, but he asked me to put it in on his behalf, so here it is. . . ." He smiled as he scribbled the word, then got up and handed her the letter.

"Perhaps you'd like to go in there," he said, opening a green swing-door that led to an inner room, "and read it by yourself."

The letter was written by hand, a bold, graceful, beautifully legible hand of amazing uniformity, so that the signature was as clear, regular and unhurried as the date and the address at the top. Betty read:

DEAR MISS CORFIELD,

I hope you will not think this letter from someone you do not know an intrusion into your private affairs. Sheikh Ayyoub Shendi, the father of Amin, is an old friend of mine. From him I learn that you and his son are getting married, and that you propose to stay away from this country. The old man is very upset at this decision, and is writing to urge Amin that you should come to live here.

You may have several reasons for not wishing to do so, and it is not for me to meddle in what is a purely personal affair for you and your husband; nor to offer advice for which I have not been asked and which in any case it would be very difficult to give. You are the first Englishwoman to marry a native of this country, and it would not be unnatural for you both to think that your life would be easier and freer if you lived it on neutral ground. All these matters are for you alone to decide. But I feel that there is one point on which perhaps a word from me might help you in making up your minds.

An English girl marrying an African may—not without good reason—imagine that life in her husband's country would be made unpleasant for her by the attitude of the English population, and even by the policy of the Colonial Government. There was a time when this would have been true of any British territory in Africa or in Asia, and it is to this day true of many, but in so far as this may be one of your reasons for planning to live elsewhere than in this country, I should like to repeat to you personally what I told Sheikh Ayyoub, when he came to consult me, that you need not fear any official or socially organised unpleasantness. We have, of course, our Blimps (Colonel and Mrs), and there is still far less social intercourse between us and the people of the country than I should like to see. There is as yet no mixed or international club. But we are nothing like

the India E. M. Forster made his passage to. And we are quite different from Kenya and South Africa. Not because we have more of the grace of God in us, but because we have no population of English settlers. The country here belongs exclusively to its own people, and there is today absolutely no inferiority attached to their status in it. If you decide to live here, you will, I am sure, also find that, in the view of many of the British officials (though in order not to mislead you I repeat we have the other sort as well), no social inferiority is attached to the status of an Englishwoman who has done what you propose to do.

I have spoken frankly in this letter. I do not wish to influence you against your instincts or your husband's instincts. You have to think of his side as well as of the English side. I know his father and his brothers well. They are nice, kindly people, but the environment would be totally different from anything you know. If this is what is deterring you, I will not attempt to argue against your misgivings. I have taken the liberty of writing this letter only because I felt distressed to think that a native of this country might feel debarred from returning home with an English wife by his or his wife's knowledge of how colonial English populations are apt to treat a mixed marriage of this sort. That was an outrage I could not allow to happen if it lay in my power to prevent it.

May I, in conclusion, wish you the best of luck and all happiness wherever you may decide to live.

Yours sincerely,

WILLIAM CARTER

Betty felt small, ridiculous and thoroughly ashamed of herself. She also felt a disagreeable quiver in the foundations of her political being. This was the first time her theories and her preconceived notions had struck a testing fact in a personal experience. And the fact had behaved in a disconcertingly unexpected manner—even after what Jean Bannerman had told her about it. For she had discounted Jean's enthusiasm about Sir William Carter. Jean was not a Socialist like her, and the standards by which she judged the pleasantness or progressiveness of empire-builders must necessarily be different from her own.

Sir William's letter would of course clinch the argument with Amin. But no scolding of herself for her silly romanticism could prevent her from feeling like a nun who had volunteered to go to a leper settlement and then learned that the lepers had lost their deformities and ceased to be infectious.

## CHAPTER V

THE white train she had seen in the picture on the Agent's wall in London ploughed its slow thin way through the desert, keeping out the cruel glare with its darkened glass windows, trying to beat back the hammering heat with the continuous whirr of electric fans—a lonely white caterpillar in that monotony of burning sand which, for two hundred miles, even out of its colossal silence screamed its enmity to life and its triumph in having never been anything but universal deadness, never allowed a drop of rain to moisten it or a seed of grass to mingle with its sterile grains; and like a skeleton mimicking life only displayed the mocking fiction of water in shimmering sheets of blue that edged the horizon and then tipped over it, always tipped over it.

To Amin this desert was quite a commonplace. He had crossed it on this train a dozen times going to and coming back from school and England. It was just a dull stretch of the journey to be endured. But Betty was fascinated and appalled. She gazed out of the darkened glass at the endless empty miles glazed with heat, herself stunned with the boxed heat of the compartment and by the incessant hum of the little electric fan battling frantically to give them a little illusion of coolness. She had only a slip on, leaving her thighs and legs and shoulders bare to the steady current from the fan. If she moved a fraction out of its path, the heat instantly settled down on her with a solid, unbearable impact, squirting out her blood moisture in sudden streams of sweat, and she edged back quickly into the target area. The air from the fan itself was almost scorching, but its beat on the bare perspiring skin dissipated the leaden weight of motionless heat and was soothing in comparison. She lay back in it and closed her eyes, lulled also by the tireless melancholy hum of the fan and the slow jolting of the train. Then the jolting became slower and slower, and with a lazy clatter and a final faint bump the train trickled to a standstill.

"This is the first station," said Amin. They had been going for two hours in the flat, void inferno.

Betty opened her eyes and looked out. She saw nothing. Only the gliding sand had become still, more dead than before. She leaned forward towards the window and peered down the sides.

She still saw nothing but sand and telegraph wires; on a telegraph pole a vulture perched. She lowered the glass of the window and a gust of glare and scorching wind—as though she had opened a furnace door—smacked her back into the compartment. She waited for a moment, blinded, blistered, then put her head out. Some twenty yards to the right she saw three or four nissen huts and a high black water-tank from which the engine was drinking. In the shade of one of the huts a goat was tethered, and two little naked, balloon-bellied children played around it—the station-master's family, Amin explained. Two railway employees were walking along the coaches, one testing the heat of the wheels with a hammer, the other carrying a greasing gun. The tap-tap of the hammer on the hot iron and the mournful whistling of the telegraph wires—stretched out like naked, tormented nerves in the heat—were the only sounds that broke the silence. That was the station, and between it and the horizon rolled the ocean of sand, mimicking water here and there with a sardonic blue glaze, shimmering in streaks between the sand and sky.

She pulled back the strap and the screen of dark glass came into position again, shutting out the furnace. Instantly the hum of the electric fan, imprisoned again, filled the compartment with its exclusive melancholy.

"How long would the station-master have to stay at a spot like this before he's transferred?" she asked.

"A year or two."

"Good Lord!" She sat back on the bed, thinking of the station-master's wife and children. He at least had his job; but a family in that lonely, burning desert!

"Those pathetic poor kids, playing in that miserable bit of shade, and looking so pleased! And his wife; what can she do in a place like this?"

"She probably has the company of the assistant station-master's wife, and there may be a married clerk or mechanic as well; there are several huts . . . and in the evening it gets cool and the sky is gay with stars. They will be sitting out drinking coffee and chatting, and waiting for the night trains to come. It isn't always as forbidding as now."

"That's a nice thought at least," she said, and looking straight ahead of her she saw herself comically distorted in the convex exterior of the shining metal basin on the opposite wall, and next to her Amin still more absurdly out of shape round the curve. She began to laugh, glad of an excuse to dissipate her malaise—a strange malaise she had felt ever since reaching the country, an



awkward consciousness that everybody looked at them in a special way—the native ticket inspector who came to the compartment, the Syrian doctor who had the next compartment, the British officials they sat next to in the dining-car, even the native waiters, trained to impeccable passivity, who served them. Not a vulgar look, not an insulting look. Only a special look, a look that came again and again, a muffled exclamation of the eyes. When they went into the dining-car everybody looked at them, and they instinctively went and sat in the corner at the far end, feeling that the eyes were following them. Betty knew why they had gone to the corner table, and her anger with Amin for this choice was only checked by the realisation that she had shared his impulse. When they sat down, she found herself trying to be natural, trying not to keep looking down at her plate, thinking hard of things to say in her normal pitch of voice, and trying not to be angry with Amin for looking so self-conscious himself.

When they went back to their compartment, Amin said, smiling: "Do you know what the waiter called you?"

"No. What?"

"‘Her Excellency, the Lady’."

"Good heavens! Why?"

"That's what the servants call English women here. The husband is ‘His Excellency the Inspector’ or ‘His Excellency the Director’, and the wife always ‘Her Excellency, the Lady’."

"How absurd!" she said. "I don't want our servants to call me that."

It was now dark, but not much cooler than before. They could see nothing outside except the stars, not a single light anywhere on the ground, although Amin said they were now leaving the desert behind them and would be passing little villages close to the river. The fans and the dusty coaches beat out their endless monotonies in the tropical night. Attendants walked down the corridors from time to time, passing feather dusters over the walls and windows; waiters came with trays of iced drinks, which you poured down on an unquenchable fire in your throat and felt trickling out again through your skin almost while you drank. And if you did not drink them quickly enough, a sediment of dust collected at the bottom of the glass. In spite of the sealed look of the train, the fine dust seeped in everywhere. In ten minutes it could leave a new pattern of imprints on the little table where your books, cigarettes and matches lay.

"Pas très gaie aujourd'hui," said Amin, feeling more sorry for her because it was she who had insisted on coming to live in his

country than he would have done if the decision had been his. "It is this dreadful heat on the train."

"Yes, I feel quite dazed." They both liked to think it was only the heat.

She looked pathetically expatriated in her flimsy slip, like a refugee. In the penumbra of her hair the fan caught little wisps and danced them like a cobweb in the breeze. He watched them quivering under the beat of the draught, catching specks of light from the lamp above her head. She looked very young, much younger than her twenty-one years, much younger than she had ever looked to him before, and he knew it was because she was afraid. Sitting on the edge of the bed, slender and smallish in body, her feet under her and her bare knees curling out of the hem of her slip, she looked like a child whose bravado had, on the edge of the unknown becoming real, turned into the nausea of panic. Her whiteness made her look more vulnerable to him, adding another depth to the poignancy of her femininity and youth.

He felt much older than she, old in the familiar possession of his country, and in a surge of chivalrous protectiveness he bent down and kissed her knees, saying, "N'ai pas peur, Bettitchka; it will be all right, and if you don't like it here, we can always go back."

She did not answer, and when he looked into her face he saw her lips trembling, then tears came flowing from her eyes, and she began to sob. He gathered her into his arms, holding her tenderly.

"It's nothing," she said. "Only this dreadful heat. Of course I shall like it here."

Where their bodies touched the heat became choking and rapidly melted into sweat. She drew out of his embrace gently.

"Just now," she said, smiling, "it's too hot even for physical endearments."

"Tomorrow," he said, "we shall be sleeping under the stars. You'll like that."

When they woke up the next morning they were only two hours from the end of the journey. It had rained recently on the ground they were going through, and there was no dust. Only a cool breeze came in from the window when they opened it, and the earth was moist and showed needle patches of green among the scrub.

"Oh, it's so pleasant today," she said, her excitement at the prospect of arriving so great now that all her misgivings of the day before were stilled. She was ashamed of having had them, and even recaptured a thrill from the torpid melancholy of the crawl across the desert which had ended in the night.

"What shall I wear?" she asked. "Will it remain cool like this? Will there be many people at the station?"

"There will be quite a little crowd," he said.

Soon the engine emitted a long whistle, and a moment later they heard a growing hollow clatter from the forward part of the train. They were on the bridge crossing the broad river into the town, and as each coach left the solid ground its dull thudding leapt instantly into a clear boom resounding above the water. As the grey metal arches rushed and clashed past the window, Betty looked out enraptured at the leafy river-bank beyond them studded with fine villas. In another moment they were crossing the bank. Then the train, now bragging with a continuous whistle, circled round a tidy little garden city of white bungalows splashed with the scarlet and orange of the golden mohur, and glided into the station. The station had no roof and no platforms. It was only an enclosure swarming with people—with turbans and helmets, with black faces and white faces, with long white shirts and white suits and khaki shorts, with shoes and red slippers on bare feet. A few white women stood about, and one or two clusters of black women, swathed from end to end like cigars.

Betty and Amin stood at adjacent windows looking out as their coach passed the parade of faces, all gazing at the train to pick out the friends or relatives they had come to meet. The gathering had a kind of holiday air about it, the air of a crowd out on something of a pleasure jaunt at a common rendezvous.

"Everybody in the town comes to the station," said Amin from his window. "Half the government offices are empty at this hour."

Betty's heart was beating bravely in the consciousness that at this moment she was making history. In another few seconds the train would stop and she would get out before all that crowd of Englishmen and natives, the first Englishwoman to arrive in the country as the wife of one of the latter. . . . She saw several arms wave in their direction and a smiling flash of white teeth; and Amin said excitedly, "There they are; that's my father, the tall man with the white beard and moustache."

"And your brother, the judge!" said Betty, recognising the Falstaffian figure Amin had described to her. The next few moments passed in a whirl. They were out of the train, surrounded by people, all men, standing in a semicircle. One after another, the men embraced Amin, with a warm flow of greetings—not kissing with a double flourish in the French style, but pressing chest on chest again and again, the heads touching ear to ear. Sheikh Ayyoub was the first, followed by the judge, whose ardour poured

out in gusts of laughter. Then they turned smiling to Betty and shook her hand with great courtesy. Sheikh Ayyoub said something in Arabic, to which, having learned from Amin a few of the elementary exchanges of Arab politeness, she replied correctly, delighting the old man and causing a ripple of amusement all round the semicircle.

The judge beaming, said, "How do you do? . . . but I see English is unnecessary. . . ." And he tried on her a slightly more complicated form of Arabic greeting. She shook her head, laughing, and Amin said, "Have pity. She hasn't got as far as that yet."

"Never mind," said the judge with another gust of delight, while his father looked on smiling but ill at ease. "You shan't lose any marks for that; you have made a very fine beginning, anyhow."

Then others came up and shook her hand. The judge and Amin introduced them. Among them was the doctor, Mustapha Effendi, and Osman, the editor. Mustapha Effendi, looking rather awed, made a very formal bow, mumbled something, then quickly edged away to stand behind Sheikh Ayyoub. Betty distributed friendly smiles, half registering the introductions, excited and bewildered. Suddenly there was a bustle behind the semicircle, and Betty saw with a thrill of gratefulness three familiar faces. Jean Bannerman, knowing that there would be no other woman at the station to meet Betty, had decided to come herself, and Sheikh Ahmed had offered her a lift in the car with him and Mahmoud. The three now arrived together, hurrying because they were late.

Sheikh Ahmed, like an old friend, shook her hand heartily, and summoning a large proportion of his English, said:

"Wilcome to our cantry." Then as the doctor and Osman giggled at his effort, he turned on them in haughty reproof. "What are you laughing at, you vulgarians? Don't you know I have been to Oxford too?" After that he addressed himself to Sheikh Ayyoub, saying, "This is a happy day indeed, Sheikh Ayyoub. Here are our two sons now returned. Praise God, our double venture has so prospered and ended so happily."

While the judge attended to the luggage and argued with porters, Betty and Amin chatted with Mahmoud and Jean Bannerman.

"How's your wife?" said Betty.

"She's very well, thank you. She hopes to see you soon," said Mahmoud, and Betty wondered why Badriya had not come with him to the station, whether here she was segregated like the other women, or merely happened to be engaged elsewhere.

Somebody else, apart from Jean Bannerman, had decided to

come to the station to meet Sheikh Ayyoub's son and his wife, but contrived to make his advent look casual. For Sir William Carter to come avowedly to meet them would have been an exaggerated gesture, perhaps a little out of place. So he had looked up the list of arrivals on that train to see if there was anybody among the other passengers whose coming could give him a reasonable excuse to be at the station. He had found a provincial governor and his wife. He had never met their train before, but they would do. He chuckled at the thought of giving such extreme and costless gratification to the silly Mrs Brandon.

And so it happened that Sir William, after shaking hands with the Brandons and saying a few words to them, looked down the station enclosure and caught the eye of Sheikh Ayyoub chatting to Sheikh Ahmed. Sheikh Ayyoub raised his hand to his head in the customary salutation, and a second later saw Sir William coming towards him, his friendly face bobbing up and down through the crowd with the springy rhythm of his walk which everybody knew so well. As usual in the summer, he was in shorts, but had on a tie and coat as well as his khaki helmet.

As he approached, others in the circle saw him and there were whispers of 'the Chief Secretary', and 'Carter', while those in the way stood aside to open a path for him to Sheikh Ayyoub and his group, where he was obviously heading. Sheikh Ayyoub advanced to meet him and they shook hands.

"Is it your son from England who has arrived on this train?"

"Yes, Your Excellency; that's him there with his wife."

"Thank God, they have arrived safely. I must greet them."

At that moment the judge, having settled the dispute of the porters and disposed of the luggage, saw Sir William and hurried back to help his father in acknowledging the honour he was doing them. The thought crossed his mind that if the Chief Secretary wanted to shake hands with Betty, his father would not be able to introduce him; and he was there, with deferential agility, just in time to say to his sister-in-law, "Sir William Carter, the Chief Secretary," as the latter came forward to greet her.

As they shook hands, the elderly colonial administrator and his young countrywoman looked into each other's eyes for a second like secret old friends—she thanking him for his letter, and he telling her that he was there in person to make good his written assurances. To Betty his appearance and manner, even more than his letter, were the very antithesis of what she had imagined senior colonial executives to be like. He stood there, in the widened circle of friends around them, like any one of the others, extremely un-

imperial and unofficial, chatting to her and Amin with friendly ease, exchanging what seemed to be badinage in Arabic with Sheikh Ahmed and Sheikh Ayyoub, cracking jokes with the judge in English, throwing remarks to the doctor on the other side.

"What was that row you were dealing with, Shendi?" he asked the judge.

"Those cursed porters!" said the judge. "They wouldn't hesitate to cut you in half so that each should have one parcel to carry."

"Carry whom in only two parcels?" asked Sir William. "Me or you?"

A great laugh broke out from the English speaking section of the party, then the doctor, emitting his feeble, discontinuous chuckle, said:

"Anyhow, the dispute was settled out of court."

"Who wouldn't settle out of court, faced by Shendi?" said Sir William, looking genially up and down the bulk of the district judge.

There was nothing to detain them now. The luggage was in the cars and they had been greeted by everybody. But for Sir William's arrival they would have been gone, and now they just waited for him to make the first move. In spite of the overcast sky, the heat was becoming unpleasant, and everybody was thinking of his office or his shop. But Sir William stood there for quite a few minutes, and Betty was sure that he had a purpose in doing so. She felt a deep, grateful warmth for him.

The question of where they were to stay until they had a place of their own had been settled decisively by Betty when her father-in-law's timid enquiry had been put to her.

"Would they *like* us to stay with them?" she had asked Amin, and he had said, "They will be hurt if we don't . . . and probably nervous if we do." To her there was no dilemma in that. Once she arrived and they knew that she was not a snob, they would cease to be nervous. She could see to that. To hurt them would be much worse; and for herself she liked the idea of staying with them, of seeing their life from within and becoming intimate with Amin's sisters. To go to a hotel, she felt, would put her on the wrong footing right away.

While Sheikh Ayyoub and the judge, therefore, were at the station, the final rehearsals were being made in the house by the women. Rehearsals and small last-minute alterations suddenly thought necessary by Aisha, who in the preceding weeks had

claimed an ever-increasing knowledge—derived from her observation of Miss Bannerman at school—of the tastes and requirements of English ladies. The mother, with a little worried animation in her sad, tired face, moved about from room to room uncertain of what should still be done. A new servant who had served in English houses had been engaged, and he looked smart and efficient. The service could be entirely left to him.

The question of where and how she was to meet her daughter-in-law had been settled in consultation with the judge, after many anxieties and hesitations. The judge said it must not be in the harem, as that might shock the Englishwoman at the moment of her arrival, but in the *salon*, the main reception-room of the house which was normally barred to the women. On the actual procedure of greeting, the judge ruled that his mother and sisters should not volunteer more than a handshake, no kissing or embracing. Aisha had asked, "And suppose she kisses us?", to which his answer had been, "You begin by putting out your hand, then do as she does . . . but if the women of the English are like their men, she won't kiss you. Their men never kiss or embrace—not even brothers! I was there when Mr Parkinson, the High Court judge, met his brother who had been away in the south for three years and nearly died of blackwater fever. . . . God be my witness, they didn't even shake hands! . . . 'Hallo, Bill!' 'Hallo, Jack!' . . . and that was all!"

And so the old woman, musing on the strange habits of a race among whom even brothers did not embrace, hobbled ineffectually on her unaccustomed high heels, waiting and saying little.

But her daughters, with some young cousins and friends who had come from the early morning to help, were in a ceaseless, chattering flutter. Aisha kept changing the positions of the two flower-bowls which Fatima had prepared and placed on the table in the middle of the *salon*.

"Why don't you leave them alone?" said Fatima. "What's wrong with them there?"

"You can't have two on the same table; it's clumsy."

"But it is a large table," said one of the cousins.

"All the same, it's more elegant to part them."

"But the window-ledge is no place for a flower-bowl," protested Fatima.

"Oh yes, it is," said Aisha, "in English houses. . . . Ask *Abdu*." (*Abdu* was the new servant.) She stood back, with her head on one side, and surveyed the bowl in its new setting. She was sure the setting was all right, but she was still not satisfied with the bowl.

There seemed to be something wrong with it. It was not as nice as the bowls she had seen in Miss Bannerman's room. The rudiments of taste stirred uneasily in her, groping for the reason. But they were still only rudiments, and gave no clear answer—no clear condemnation of the formless, erect congestion, the lack of graceful spacing and curving, the clash of orange with pale pink . . . and she was afraid to offend Fatima by a new line of criticism.

Finishing with the *salon*, they all flowed back to the bedroom, and Aisha arranged a third bowl herself for the dressing-table, tumbling uncertainly to achieve better effects than her sister.

Her mother came into the room, saying, "Is everything all right here? I saw a flower-bowl left on the window-ledge in the *salon*, so I put it on the table."

"It wasn't left there," said Aisha, fretting with impatience and hurry. "I put it there on purpose; it's nicer like that."

"Nicer? . . . All right, I'll put it back then," said the mother, meekly deferring to her daughter who had been going to school for four years, and she went out, hurrying a little.

"Now, you must go and sit in the *salon*," said some of the cousins and friends, who, of course, had no place in the reception ceremony, but would wait, peeping, in the women's quarters, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Ingilizia whom later, perhaps, they might hope to meet.

Aisha gave the room a last look of inspection, and as she did so she remembered something. She remembered that the rug in front of the dressing-table in Miss Bannerman's room was not laid out parallel to the wall, but diagonally. Without quoting the source of her inspiration (having, she sensed, already overplayed that authority) she said:

"I think that rug would look nicer if we turned it round like this." And she bent down and pulled it into the more original position.

"What's this?" asked a cousin. "It is just crooked now."

Aisha debated quickly with herself whether to leave her apparent caprice to face the opposition unaided, or to crush criticism at once by again disclosing her precedents. She decided to stand alone.

"No, I think it's very nice like this; more like a decoration."

"All right, have it your own way," said the cousin, turning aside with pique. "Now that your brother has married one of the rulers, no one can speak to you. You know everything!"

Aisha felt the prick of truth in this taunt. Ever since she knew that Amin was marrying an English girl, she had felt exhilarated with a secret pride which gave her confidence, made her more



assertive with her cousins and friends, and seemed to open strange doors in her imagination. She was just about to deny this truth, when Fatima, still annoyed about the flower-bowls, said:

"She knows everything from Miss Bannerman."

Considering that she had abstained from mentioning the oracle in connection with the rug, Aisha felt outraged by this jibe, so outraged that she retorted:

"It was absolutely my own idea, if you like to know, and I don't care a pin if Miss Bannerman would think it nice like this or not."

The old retainer, Fadl-el-Mula, came bustling into the room.

"Your mother says you are to come at once to the *salon*," he said. "She says they will be coming in a minute." And he bustled out again, followed by the two girls, while the unofficial crowd retreated quickly to the women's quarters. Abdu, the new servant, was in the kitchen doorway strapping on his green belt, with a consciousness of dignity and a sense of ritual that made the slovenly Fadl-el-Mula look more primitive than ever, so that Aisha felt ashamed of having him about the place.

Their mother was sitting awkwardly in one of the large upholstered chairs of the *salon*, ill at ease both in the enclosed seat and in the semi-public room. In the harem she sat on a rug on the floor or on the low, palm-matted bed, and she felt imprisoned in the deep sprung chair, just as her feet felt imprisoned in the stockings and black glacé shoes which she was wearing for the first time in her life, because her son, the judge, said that she must.

"Would it not have been better," she said nostalgically, "if we had waited for her inside?"—meaning in the women's quarters. "She could have come to us there."

"Of course not," said Aisha, savouring her participation, for the first time, in an occasion taking place in the outside world of the *salon*.

"Shall I always have to wear shoes and stockings when she is with us?" asked her mother. "Saleh didn't say."

"We will ask him when he comes back," said Fatima. "About us too."

Aisha said nothing, but her mind was made up: if her sister-in-law always wore shoes and stockings when they were together, so would she. She walked to the large mirror in the middle of the wall, and stood examining her appearance, wondering if her sister-in-law would find her dress all right. She herself liked it, but not with the confidence she had felt before when liking her dresses.

Fatima startled her by saying:

"What shall we call her?" That point had never been settled.

In her absence she had just been 'Amin's wife'; but now . . .

"They've come! They've come!" Fadl-el-Mula, who had been keeping a look-out at the gate, came running up the steps, shouting. Aisha ran to the door, and Fatima leaped from her chair and followed her.

A great confusion came over the mother. For a moment she did not know whether to stand up or remain seated. She looked nervously at the door.

"They're here!" cried Fatima, looking back at her mother. "Why don't you come? Come quickly!"

It was Amin's voice on the verandah, rather than her daughter's calling, that finally wrenched the old woman out of her chair in an unsteady flutter on the strange heels. She reached the door as they were entering, and for a moment saw only Amin putting his arms round her, looking even bigger than his gigantic brother just behind him.

Aisha found herself face to face with Betty, looking, petrified with expectancy, into the dancing green flame of the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen.

"This is my youngest sister, Aisha," said the judge. "The one who speaks English."

Aisha, remembering her rehearsals, began lifting her hand slowly, mechanically.

"Hallo, Aisha," said Betty, unfreezing the girl with a great, friendly smile, and taking her hand she bent forward and kissed her on the cheek. But in spite of the judge's permission in respect of this development, Aisha was too stunned by excitement, happiness and sudden adoration of the English girl to return the kiss. All she could do was to echo the 'hallo' and smile back with her shining round black eyes.

"Fatima, what's the matter with you?" said Sheikh Ayyoub. "Why don't you come and greet your brother's wife?" She was standing a little apart, overcome by jealousy of her younger sister's little knowledge of English, feeling that she herself would be a complete stranger to the Englishwoman, whereas Aisha could talk to her. Aisha had gone to school till the age of fourteen, whereas she had been taken away when she was eleven, because it had not yet become a respectable custom for girls approaching the age of puberty to remain at school.

She came forward shyly when her father spoke to her, but she had had time to think, and if she could not mumble any English words like her sister, she could at least score a point against her by returning Betty's kiss.

By then the long series of patting embraces between the mother and Amin had come to an end, and the old woman, more composed than her daughters at the critical moment, sustained by the poise of her years and unthrilled, turned to receive Betty's greeting, and when the English girl kissed her, she was touched and clasped her on the shoulder with a little affectionate pressure, saying:

"God bless you, my daughter, God bless you." To which Betty replied with the Arabic for "How are you; I hope you are well." This unexpected, familiar touch had an electric effect on the three women. It fell on the semi-official stiffness of the ceremony like a magic solvent and melted it instantly. Delighted natural laughter broke out from the two girls, and a quieter stream of it from the mother; and from the six pairs of eyes a friendly, happy warmth leaped at the English girl. Sheikh Ayyoub smiled benignly, and the judge, blowing a gust of good humour all round, said:

"You see, she knows Arabic already!"

The mother, no longer mumbling impersonal benedictions, feeling amazedly in communion with the stranger after that single utterance, said, "I am well, thank you; please God, you are well." And she followed her words bravely into the depth of Betty's eyes.

Betty said in English, "I am sorry this is almost all I can say now; but I shall soon learn more and be able to speak to you."

"Oh, what else does she know now?" said Fatima, seizing upon the 'almost all' when Amin had interpreted.

"Let her say it all," said Aisha, following her sister in Arabic, then remembering that she could communicate with the English girl directly, and now bold enough to do so, she turned to her and said in slow, careful English:

"Say everything you know in Arabic."

So Betty brought out her little repertoire of primal courtesies: she said 'good morning', and 'good evening', and 'thank you', and 'if you please'; then indicating the two girls in turn, she said, 'my sister', following that with a designation of the other relations obtaining in the company. New outbursts of delight, mounting exclamations of wonder and appreciation greeted every item, and where her pronunciation betrayed her the merriment was great.

"I am beginning to think you took your degree at Oxford in Arabic," said the judge.

"God be my witness, she is eloquent in our tongue," said Sheikh Ayyoub, chuckling happily, forgetting the uneasiness he had felt sitting next to her in the car. "She will learn it in no time."

"True, by God," said his wife. "I was not saying she would know a single word of Arabic when she arrived."

Amin beamed, extraordinarily happy.

Then Aisha and Fatima, all a-twitter around her, started asking her the words for the various things in the room. Aisha asked in English, Fatima just by pointing her finger and repeating the Arabic for 'and this . . . ?' Most of them Betty knew—doors, windows, chairs. . . . Then Fatima pointed to the flower-bowl on the table. Betty looked at the clumsy arrangement of flowers, bunched together without any taste, and the pathos of its proud, unconscious crudity gave her a sharp pain. The rest of the room was impersonally correct, stiff and a little showy, but impressive with its own kind of splendour, as it came from the shops—gorgeous carpets, fine, almost new chairs and tables, the chairs ranged round the walls, the tables in the middle. It was a formal room, a shop-window room, with nothing of a lived-in look about it. The walls and tables were bare, except for a few ash-trays on the latter, and a dinner-group photograph, slightly off-square, on one of the walls—a Chamber of Commerce banquet attended by Sheikh Ayyoub. In the whole room there was nothing personal, nothing that enshrined any little sentiment—obviously nothing to which the women had imparted anything of themselves except that flower-bowl, which cried out pitifully in the loneliness of its gesture and untutored appeal.

"Flowers! Nice flowers," said Betty, noticing that Amin too was looking at the bowl, and thinking that he was feeling ashamed of its crudity before her. There was a similar crudity in the dresses of the two girls, a protest of colours that lay ill at ease together, violences of lace and ribbon, edges of underwear showing below the skirt, and the creases of stockings. It was on the mother, particularly, that Betty noticed the clumsiness of the new, obviously alien, footwear. The stockings were too long for the old woman's short legs and feet, and so poorly suspended that the top of the hose doubled down and drooped baggily over what showed of the calf; while the toe-cap bunched through the embrace of the shoe in front.

Betty noticed these things with a warming compassion. The difference between the men and the women was startling. The men looked easy, well-dressed, whether in their traditional costume, like Sheikh Ayyoub, or in Western clothes, like the judge and the other men she had seen at the station. But every detail in the women's appearance that was the slightest departure from their native cigar-like swathing, looked pathetically wrong, and the more elaborate the effort, the deeper was the stab of pathos. . . . It was then, too, that Betty became aware of the peculiar heavy odour of

scented grease that emanated from the women. She had not registered it distinctly when she kissed them at the door, but in the interior of the room its concentrated pungency filled the warm air. And the scent, unlike the clumsiness of dress, had not even pathos to commend it. Betty, with all her goodwill, found it disagreeable.

Abdu then brought in a tray of orangeade, while Fadl el-Mula and the old woman servant, having already greeted the young master and his wife, hung close to the door, on the back verandah, chattering and laughing, for they too had heard Betty's display of Arabic. With avid thirst, Betty took the glass of cold drink, spotlessly clean, from the polished silver tray, and had a long, sweet gulp. But when she came to drink again, somehow the odour of the women's scent had got into the glass, and she could only drink now by holding her breath, shutting out both the smell and the flavour of the orange.

After refreshments, Amin and Betty were conducted to their room, everybody coming in and hovering about to make sure that they had everything they needed.

Betty kept repeating in Arabic, "Nice, very nice," looking at everything in the room with great appreciation, to the intense relief of Sheikh Ayyoub and his wife. And she really liked the room, which was large and cheerful and seemed to have in it all that she was likely to need. . . . If only it did not fill up so quickly with the odour of that scent! Like an enveloping cloud, the odour moved about with the women, leaving bits of itself to linger behind wherever they stopped for a few moments.

"Oh, how nice," she said. "Flowers here too!"

Aisha, who was now for a moment alone with her and Amin in the room, asked, "Which are nicer? These or the flowers in the sitting room?"

"These," said Betty, noticing at once the attempted arrangement.

Aisha said, "I put those in", adding, "and I put the rug before the table like that. . . Do you like it?"

"I like it very much," said Betty, thrilling to see a significance in these little gleams of personal expression and in the girl's consciousness of them—above all, in the fact that she was drawing her attention to them. She looked into Aisha's eyes, and a current of sympathy passed between the two girls.

The mother came into the room again, saying, "If the lady would like to have a bath before lunch. . ."

"Don't call her 'the lady'," said Amin, stung by the word and glad that Betty didn't know it yet. "Don't you know what her name is?"

I know it, my son, but she is still a stranger to us, and her name does not come readily to my tongue."

"Can we all call her by her name?" Aisha asked.

"Of course," he said, smiling, sorry to have spoken shrilly to his mother. "Come on, try it."

"Betty!" said Aisha, thrilled as she had never been before with any sound that came out of her lips.

"Yes, Aisha."

"You see," said Amin. "It works!"

As they came out of the room, Betty caught sight of a girl's figure flitting across a doorway that opened at the other end of the verandah and seemed to lead into quite a different part of the house.

"Who's that?" she asked.

Aisha giggled.

"Who was it?"

"My cousins and some friends are in the harem," she said.

"Why don't they come out?"

"They won't come out—they are shy."

"What are they doing there?"

"Having a peep at you," said Amin. "Hedy Lumina in her first film wasn't a bigger sensation than you are at this moment."

"Let's go and see them," said Betty.

"You go with the girls," said Amin as Fatima rejoined them. "I might be too much for them."

The clandestine spectators, or those of them that were nearest to the observation-point, saw the English girl coming towards them. There was a scuffling confusion at the door as those in front drew back in a panic, saying, "She is coming here! She is coming!" And a clamour of queries broke out from those behind in the same twittering, giggling frenzy. "True?" "Coming really, God be your witness?" "Swear by the Prophet!" "Let me see, where?"

They all fell back, pell mell, many losing their slippers in the retreat and desperately striving to retrieve them. Feet crossed twice and soles skidded on the tiled floor. When Betty and her escort entered, the whole group was bunched against the far wall in swathed, face averted, panting shyness, held in a most fragile silence. The odour of their scent, the stale exhalation of the harem—ten times more powerful here than in the sitting-room—smacked Betty in the face, and but for the horror of mortifying them and disgracing herself she would have spun out instantly. But she held her ground, trying her Arabic greetings on them, and they giggled and twittered and turned their faces this way and that.

While Betty was in the harem, a tense argument was going on on the back verandah.

"But you must eat with us today," Amin was saying to his mother.

"Why don't you leave me alone, my son; I've never in my life eaten at the men's table." The old woman had married at a time when it was still taboo for the wife to eat with her husband, and it was a fact that in more than forty years she had never sat at the same dining-table as Sheikh Ayyoub. Like the *salon*, the dining-room belonged to the men's part of the house, and the women never used it.

"But you will today," he insisted. "This is a very special occasion. The table will not be complete without you."

"I think you had better do without me. The girls will eat with you; isn't that enough?"

"No, it isn't. Betty will think it very strange if you don't eat with us."

"Isn't everything about us women here strange to her? She knows we are not like her, and it is better that she should not see me disgrace myself at a European table. You know I can't manage this business of knives and forks comfortably."

"She wouldn't mind that a bit; she would mind your not sitting with us much more."

But the old woman still resisted, and it was not until Sheikh Ayyoub and the judge threw their weight into the argument on Amin's side that she finally gave in, knowing very well that she would be too nervous to eat anything, and that her real lunch she would have to take later in the ease of her own quarters, when she would also have taken off the shoes and stockings.

## CHAPTER VI

BADRIYA was not doing anything when Mahmoud had gone to the station to meet Amin and Betty. She had not gone with him because it would not have been proper for her to do so. The question had not even been raised.

Since their marriage she had gone out with him a few times; once to tea with Miss Bannerman. But there was a strict limit to the outings they could undertake together. She could go with him for drives in the car, or to the cinema, if they took a box, but on social occasions almost never. Such occasions were entirely for men in the native scheme of life, and the number of English

houses to which they were sometimes invited to tea was very small. When he went to call on a native friend she accompanied him if she knew the friend's wife or sisters, but she disappeared into the harem the moment they arrived and only rejoined him when it was time to leave. Also, when friends came to see him, they came without their wives, and her instinct was always to run away when they arrived. If the visitors were intimate friends and few in number, he sometimes insisted on her staying. She did so with great reluctance, looked awkward the whole time, and almost never spoke. The men, too, mostly felt awkward if she stayed, even more awkward than in the company of white women. The sight of a woman of their own folk sitting with them uncovered and in a European dress showing her arms and legs was something new and unnatural to them . . . and she was always the only woman present, alone, acutely alone.

It hurt him that she could not go with him to the station, and it hurt him to have to admit to himself the impossibility of her doing so. He was having to recognise one such fact after another, all showing him his impotence as one individual trying to live an emancipated domestic life against the established, the yet unshaken, scheme of things in his country. And Badriya, as an ally in this fight, was a broken reed. If she had been older, better educated, more independent herself of her background, things would have been less difficult. But she was still more at home in the harem than outside it, more at ease with her uneducated cousins and friends than with him. A gravitation, against which he could do little, always drew her into the women's quarters.

The arrival of Amin and Betty gave him new hope. The presence of such a couple, Betty's advent particularly, he thought, might help to recreate for them some of the conditions they had known in England. With them they could have a social life impossible with anyone else. . . . And there was Miss Bannerman too. They would be able to see more of her now. It was dull for her to come to their house if only Badriya was there, but with the added company of Betty they could invite her more often.

The day after their arrival he took Badriya and went to see them. It had rained heavily in the night, and the morning was so cool and soothingly cloudy that Badriya put on her light beige coat for the first time since their return from England. It was the coat she had worn that evening at Oxford when they went to the pictures alone . . . the coat, the coolness, the presence of Amin and Betty—it seemed to be England all over again. Not since the wedding had he felt so cheerful.



Soon, it was England again in another sense which he had forgotten. He and Betty and Amin were launched on a wide swift tide of talk, leaving his wife as though standing on a shore from which she could not embark. Every now and then they became conscious of her isolation, and came back to say a few things to her—simple things on simple subjects, but the tendency to return to their own level, to race ahead in their Oxford talk, was irresistible.

They were sitting in the big room, the four of them alone. Aisha and Fatima were not in evidence when Mahmoud and Badriya had arrived.

In a pause in the general conversation, Badriya said, "I will go and see the girls."

"Where are the girls?" asked Betty. "Why don't they come here?"

Amin smiled, saying, "They're shy of Mahmoud."

"Good heavens!" said Betty. "I'll go and fetch them." She went and a few moments later came back with her sisters-in-law. Aisha walked in bravely, her head erect, giving the impression that she was glad to have been summoned. But Fatima slipped in bashfully, keeping to the wall and looking down until she had passed Mahmoud and reached the settee on which Badriya was sitting. Safely in port, she berthed sideways, next to her, so that she could look up at her alone without exposing her face to the part of the room where Mahmoud sat. Aisha sat on the other side of Badriya and next to Betty.

Soon the company split conversationally along the same lines. Badriya and the two sisters chatted in Arabic, while the other three, no longer feeling uneasy about neglecting an awkward fourth, plunged into their adult, English talk.

Mahmoud told them that he was going to join the college in January; he had seen the principal and won him over to the idea of starting a tentative philosophy course, which he would run in addition to his lectures on economics. In the meantime he was going to give his father a hand at the farm. Betty was greatly interested in his ideas for welfare schemes among the cultivators.

"But why philosophy?" she asked. "What need has your country of philosophy just now?"

"Blasphemy!" he said. "Blasphemy!" He gave her a smiling frown of deprecation.

"No, but seriously?"

"Not by bread alone . . ."

Amin quoted:

"If thou of fortune be bereft  
And of thy goods there be but left  
Two loaves, sell one and with the dole  
Buy hyacinth to feed thy soul."

"The hyacinth is all right by me, but I have no patience with philosophy."

"You're rather hard on my chosen subject," said Mahmoud.  
"Why?"

"Because I get fed up with cloistered dons playing a game for their own amusement and pretending it's something brightly important. Apart from your own interest in the game, do you really think it necessary that your young men at the college should be taught it?"

"I do."

"Why? . . . So that they will understand the riddle of the universe?"

"You don't teach philosophy because you've got the answer to the riddle of the universe. You teach it in order to arouse a passion for truth and precise logical thinking, to arm people against the facile and the fraudulent. . . . Isn't this of the utmost importance in a young country like ours, where the worship of false gods, old and new, is the greatest danger? Where the alleged sanctity of religion, even of superstition, still bars the way to honest thinking? If we want to progress we must learn to think unconditionally, and this is what philosophy teaches you."

He spoke with such ardour and force of conviction that Betty was impressed and thrilled. She saw him bigger than before, and her bias against philosophy appeared silly and superficial. They continued to talk on the subject for some time. Then she began to ask him about the condition of the cultivators on his father's farm, how they lived and how much they earned.

"Why not come and see for yourself?" he asked.

"I'd love to."

"I'll take you any day you like. We'll go and have breakfast there, and spend the morning. Amin can paint if he likes, and you can begin your social investigations immediately."

"And find out how the peasants are exploited by the colonial aristocracy," said Amin.

"They certainly are exploited," said Mahmoud. "Of that there is no doubt, I am afraid, though my father is a good employer by local standards. . . . Perhaps Miss Bannerman would like to come too, if we go before her school reopens. Let's make a party of it."

There was a knock at the door, and a moment later male voices were heard asking Fadl-el-Mula if Amin was at home, and the sound of male feet followed, coming up the steps. Fatima and Aisha jumped up from their seats and fled. And before Mahmoud could stop her, Badriya jumped up too and fled with them.

The visit to the farm was fixed for the following Friday, and the next morning Mahmoud went to invite Miss Bannerman. Her school was not due to reopen for another two weeks, and she was in her office, working out time-tables for the new term. He saw her from the window, as he crossed the verandah to reach her door, in a cool white frock, her hair drawn back smoothly across the temple and knotted just above the nape of her neck; and in that glimpse he noticed again the peculiar charm of her face, which had struck him that first afternoon in London when he had sat opposite her in the taxi on the way from the station—the simple seriousness which was not severe, the femininity underneath, appealing quietly without ornament, without even beauty.

She accepted the invitation readily, and they chatted for a moment; then he said:

"Well, I'll be going; you must be very busy."

"I'm not, as a matter of fact; I have just finished that lot, and I haven't decided what to do next. . . . Have a lemonade; I was just thinking of ordering myself one." She collected the time-table sheets and pushed them into a tray.

He was glad to stay and talk to her. When he saw her or Betty—the only two Englishwomen in the country whom he knew on any level deeper than that of superficial social exchanges—he felt an exhilaration which nothing else gave him—the exhilaration of being in communion with a woman who had a mind like his own. And of the two, he preferred Jean Bannerman, finding her company more delicately soothing. Politically, she was a mild liberal, less advanced than Betty. Betty's views were closer to his own, but with the Scotswoman he felt a deeper affinity.

They talked about the school and the promising girls in it, about the future of these girls and how many of them would go on to the new secondary school.

"I'd very much like Aisha, Sheikh Ayyoub's daughter, to go on to the secondary school," she said. "She's a bright girl, and very keen; but when I mentioned it to her father last year, he wouldn't hear of it; asked me if I thought she would be seeking government employment!"

"Perhaps Amin and his wife will be able to help you now with the old man. Betty is quite a redoubtable crusader." He remem-

bered the scene of the day before, when the two sisters and Badriya had bolted out of the room, still feeling the pain of it.

"She is, isn't she? And at the same time very friendly and ready to mix. Did you notice what a great success she was at the station? I believe she may be able to do a lot of good here, you know."

They became silent, feeling self-conscious about the line their conversation had taken. All this talk about girls and education, Aisha and the secondary school, seemed to involve Badriya and Mahmoud's position. When Jean spoke with such warmth of more education for Aisha she remembered that Mahmoud himself was married to a girl with only primary education. Even the scheme whereby Badriya was to continue her education privately after her marriage was not proving a success. Jean had given her a few lessons in the past month, but the girl did not seem capable of making an effort; and Jean had been thinking that sooner or later she would have to tell Mahmoud or Sheikh Ahmed that she could not continue to take money from them when she was able to do so little.

To change the subject from education and introduce one which would unembarrass him because his personal position in regard to it was on the flattering side, she said:

"What I should like to know is whether the segregation of women in Moslem countries is really a matter of religion or only a social custom. . . . If only the latter, it should be much easier to fight it."

"Only the latter. It's not prescribed by Islam. The Prophet in his later life segregated his own wives, but he made it clear that others were not expected to follow his example. . . . The custom grew out of early conquests and concubinage; and the proof is that it is only practised among the better-to-do classes in the towns. In the villages it is unknown."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Oh yes. In the fields the men and women work together."

"And the women are quite unveiled?"

"Often down to the waist. They have no inhibitions above the waistline; and the men think nothing of it. You will see them when we go to the farm."

He was instantly ashamed, fearing that he had committed an indelicacy, said something which might embarrass an English girl who was alone with him at that moment. His intellectual assurance with her, perfect otherwise, faltered in regard to anything connected with sex.

Waiting to see if his reference to the unveiled breasts of the women peasants had given her any offence, he began unconsciously

to bite the nail of his right index finger, imagining that she might be saying to herself, 'After all, he is a Moslem, an Arab . . . he still doesn't know how to talk to English women'.

The next instant their eyes met, and there was a flate of simultaneous laughter as he hurriedly took his finger out of his mouth.

"I haven't lost it," he said, reassured. "Here it is!" And, fumbling in his pockets, produced the nail-file with a flourish. . . . "I really do use it—sometimes. First thing in the morning."

"But not in emergencies," she said, still laughing.

"Well, not exactly as an aid to thought."

At the back of his mind—in a region where thoughts arise unsummoned and, behind the words one is speaking, pursue a clandestine, tolerated existence for a few seconds—the notion of a different version of his life leaped fancifully into being as they talked. The thing he had been inhibited against all the time he was at Oxford—the imaginability for him of love and marriage with an Englishwoman—became for a moment imaginable as he thought of Amin and Betty, now an established fact in the town. The thought came upon him with a startling, exciting impact, like an unexpected close-up of previous remotenesses. And though he shrank from it in smitten loyalty to his wife, there was in his shrinking a bitterness at its coming too late, which added to the disloyalty.

For some time even after he left Jean Bannerman, he found himself in turn flicking that thought out of his mind, and then, strangely, calling it back. . . . Even if it was too late, even as an idle fancy, it pleased him and went on skirmishing, academically, with his loyalty.

Before she had been in the town many days Betty had decided that she must forthwith set about rescuing her younger sister-in-law from the awaiting dungeon of the harem. Fatima, at sixteen, was already beyond her reach, well inside the gateway, with very little education, with no English, without even the desire for liberation. But in Aisha, Betty felt the desire immediately, and the dawning of a great hope that everything was going to be different for her now that by a miracle an English girl had come into the family.

"What about your sisters?" she asked Amin. "Wouldn't they like to come on this trip to Mahmoud's farm?"

"The question is, what about my father?" he said.

"Surely he wouldn't object?"

"You can ask him. Perhaps if you guarantee that you will be

personally responsible for their virtue . . ." His detached flippancy annoyed her a little. He seemed too ready to accept the old order in the house. He could come back home after all those years away and not be appalled at the position of his sisters.

In the evening she tackled Sheikh Ayyoub. She just told him of the invitation and said that she proposed taking the girls with her. The judge was there, and they were having dinner. The mother, after her great effort on the day of their arrival, had relapsed to the comfort and propriety of eating her meals in the harem, and Fatima kept her company, also finding that ease in the long run outweighed the thrill of sitting down to meals in the dining room with her English relative. But Aisha was there, looking quite at home, helping herself with steady skilful hands when Abdu came round with the dishes and shot them forward, deftly balanced on the outspread fingers of one hand.

"Who will be there?" asked Sheikh Ayyoub.

"Only Mahmoud and his wife and Miss Bannerman."

Aisha looked from Betty to her father, adoring the English girl, following her down endless vistas of imagination to worlds of almost unimaginable spaciousness.

"Perhaps you had better go alone with your wife this time," said Sheikh Ayyoub, speaking to Amin, answering Betty in directly.

Aisha's hopes dimmed, but she watched the ball eagerly as it returned to her champion.

"Why?" said Betty. "What's the harm in it? If Mahmoud's wife may go with Amin, why shouldn't Amin's sisters go with Mahmoud?" With her eyes she appealed to the judge, while Amin, smiling, amusedly neutral, relayed to his father.

"Mahmoud's wife has got her husband; she is his business. But Amin's sisters are not married yet . . . and not everybody in the town approves of Mahmoud's wife sitting with men."

"Ah, Father," said the judge, with a gesture of acceptance before the inevitability of progress, massively wise, "things are bound to change. . . . Let it be! Isn't it time we became a little civilised? Let the girls go." Then to Betty with a large, apologetic chuckle, he said:

"My father is very conservative still in these ways."

"But they have met Mahmoud already, when he came this morning with his wife. I brought them in."

"Better not let my father know," said the judge, "or he'll think you a maker of sedition!"

"We'll think about it," said Sheikh Ayyoub.

"Let them come, as a favour to me," said Betty. "This is the first favour I have asked you." She sensed that the personal appeal was likely to be more effective than any rational arguments. They were that kind of people; courteous, anxious to oblige—and in this matter she would be unscrupulous enough to take advantage.

"Now you can't refuse," said the judge.

"All right," said Sheikh Ayyoub. "Let Aisha go." And as Aisha had from the beginning been Betty's objective, she was content with her victory.

"You are a very nice man," she said to her father-in-law, "and we two are going to be great friends."

## CHAPTER VII

MAHMOUD called for them soon after six on Friday morning. He came with Badriya and Miss Bannerman in his father's large Buick, and when the party of six was comfortably installed in it—Amin with Betty and Aisha behind—they set out for the farm.

There was little dust on the road because the rains were not over yet, and as they left the town in the cool of the morning, the vast level earth in front of them was green with the thin ephemeral grass of August. The vegetable cultivators from the river-banks passed them with their cavalcades of donkeys hurrying to the market for the early morning shopping, carrying water-melons and cucumbers and aubergines. The glistening green spheres of the giant water-melons, held in nets of palm-rope, drooped heavily on either side of the little donkeys, like a collection of verdant worlds most inappropriately placed on the shoulders of the least Atlas-like among beasts of burden.

"The poor brutes!" said Jean. "How they bend under their loads!"

The ability of the donkey's back to bend without breaking seemed cruel and miraculous; miraculous also the ability of the little rickety hind legs of the she-asses to keep trotting along in their pathetic clumsy dance, crossing and rubbing each other at the fetlocks, without suddenly sinking to the ground.

"Let's rid them of one," said Mahmoud. "It'll be very nice with breakfast. Do you like water-melons?"

"I love them."

He slowed down and stopped, beckoning to the nearest drover, who with a little stick was exhorting his beast to a brisk trot.

"You can say this for them at least," he said, "they're willing to run as fast as their animals; they can't afford to ride themselves, because that would deprive them of a few piastres for the extra load."

The man altered course, coming at the car.

"What are we stopping for?" asked Betty.

Mahmoud told her.

"I've never seen one before," she said. "What an adventure!"

"Peace be upon you," said the man, his gaunt, underlined face streaming with sweat, so that Jean felt as sorry for him now as she had felt for the donkey a moment before, realising that they were brothers in adversity rather than oppressor and oppressed.

"And on you be peace," said Mahmoud. "Why do you overload your donkey so?"

"How?" said the man nervously. Though Mahmoud's tone was not unfriendly he became suspicious, afraid that Mahmoud might be a government inspector catching him out in an offence.

"Isn't it too much for him?"

"Not at all, Yaffendi; this is nothing. It could carry more than that. It could carry me on top as well, but then we shouldn't arrive in time; and to put less on it would cause me loss."

"Are they good melons?"

"These? . . . The best in the country, Yaffendi. If you find better than them in the Governor-General's palace, I'll give you your money back."

"We will only buy under the knife," said Amin from behind, remembering the amusing surgical operation by which a water-melon was tested.

"But of course under the knife," said the man, lifting a magnificent orb from the net and slapping it lovingly so that it resounded. "And if it isn't redder than blood, don't take it." Then, deftly, he pulled a dagger from a leather ring on his upper arm, which carried an amulet as well, and slit the sphere just above the equator with four deep incisions, making a parallelogram; and seizing the slab of crust, he yanked out a slanting chunk of firm red core, glistening with black seed.

"By God, you spoke the truth," said Mahmoud. "It is very good."

The man replaced the chunk in its shaft, as though returning a few thousand cubic miles of Africa into their position on the globe after a brief removal, and slammed the crust in. Mahmoud gave him two shillings, which was about twice as much as the water-melon was worth, and leaving him grinning and saluting, drove on.



Amin had been feeling still dull from sleep, sitting back quietly, with his eyes half closed. He had brought his paints and brushes with him, and was wondering what he would find to paint at the farm, when the man flashed at them his slice of water-melon core. The vision of colour woke him—the glistening black lozenges embedded in the crimson, the strong hard green of the crust. He had found his subject! He would paint a picture that brought out the quintessence of the water-melon—not only its shape and colour, but its cool succulence on a hot day, its flavour in the nostrils, its sensuous totality—just as that other picture by Monet brought out the quintessence of the melon.

“How much does that cultivator earn per day, do you think?” asked Betty.

“A few shillings—ten or fifteen piastres.”

“He didn’t look as though he had quite enough to eat.”

“He hasn’t,” said Mahmoud. “Our peasants don’t really eat enough—almost no meat or cereals; only thin millet bread dipped in a vegetable sauce with shavings of dried meat in it, and occasional handfuls of dates or a gulp of milk.”

Amin was glad that Mahmoud had taken up the other end of this conversation. He wanted to go on thinking of his picture, slicing water-melons in his head into exciting patterns. Just then the water-melon was of far more consequence to him than its underfed grower.

Badriya, sitting between Mahmoud and Jean Bannerman, did not speak much, and listened even less to the general conversation, but Aisha listened avidly to everything Betty said, trying hard to understand, though many of the words and some of the ideas were beyond her. And Betty did not neglect her.

They passed herds of goats. They passed half-decomposed carcasses of camels and oxen, mummifying in the sun, the ribs arching emptily through the withered hide. They passed a few mud huts flanking a patch of cultivation. And just before they reached the farm they passed three Arabs coming in from the desert on their camels. From the car they could see the taciturn, impassive faces of the three men, as dry and impassive as the desert itself; and the lean, hard figures, chocolate-brown and naked to the waist, swaying with the patient, stately rhythm of the padded tread of the big beasts. They passed so close to the car that Betty smelled them and noticed the incredible griminess of their pants, and of the robes of what once must have been white calico, which they carried slung over their shoulders. The white had become milk-chocolate with accumulations of dust sucked into body grease.

"They don't look as though they had ever been washed," she said.

"They haven't," said Mahmoud. "There's no water in the desert to waste on washing clothes. They wear them until even they can wear them no more, then they come into the town, sell a few tins of butter, and buy new ones."

The three desert dwellers, asking not a jot more of life than their first progenitor in these sandy spaces had asked, swayed on, heading for the town. In the opposite direction the eight-cylinder Buick carrying their Oxford compatriots and the two English girls, and Badriya who had been to England, and Aisha who was just stepping out of the harem, went over a canal bridge, turned into a lane of date-palms and drew up at a little bungalow which was Sheikh Ahmed's rest-house.

Ibrahim, a middle-aged man who was Sheikh Ahmed's farm manager, chief clerk and general factotum rolled into one, was expecting them. He had had breakfast prepared at the rest-house and the approaches swept and tidied.

They went round the offices and the engine-room where the 200 horse-power Royston hummed efficiently in the care of a young native mechanic who knew as much about it as his father, a tribesman from the west, had known about camels; they saw the 20-inch pipe sucking water voraciously from the river and pouring it gurgling into the long, straight canal, where it flowed out of sight between date-palms. Then they walked among the fields for a while, seeing parties of men and women working. Betty walked between Mahmoud and Ibrahim, asking her socio-economic questions about wages, conditions of labour, the share of the tenants, prices of staple food.

"You must beware of this lady," said Mahmoud to Ibrahim. "She is a revolutionary. Worse than me. That's why she is asking you all these questions."

"How?" said Ibrahim, laughing, dismissing the quaint notion. Women revolutionaries were unknown to him.

"And this man," continued Mahmoud to Betty, "will be your most deadly opponent here. He doesn't believe in progress."

"How?" said Ibrahim, protesting affably with another laugh. The interrogative monosyllable, asked in merry reproach, was his general form of argument when he felt that the ground ahead might be treacherous, as he usually did when Mahmoud began to draw him.

"You are a merciless exploiter of the people, Ibrahim," said Mahmoud. "You don't believe in any of my schemes."

"God be my witness," said Ibrahim, "we are having enough trouble with our workers without your beginning to spoil them. They are lazy and careless. Nothing pleases them these days."

"You see," said Mahmoud to Betty. "Isn't this the language of Conservatives in England? . . . The Capitalist International knows no frontiers."

The last remark passed over Ibrahim's head. He said:

"And what about Sheikh Ahmed? Is he going to agree to your schemes? They will cost money, you know." The farm manager was fond of Mahmoud and not unwilling to humour him in harmless ways, but he drew the line at anything involving expenditure for which no tangible return could be foreseen.

"If my father doesn't agree, I shall retire from farming." He thought he could persuade his father, but the pleasantry concealed a serious decision: if his father opposed his schemes, he would decline to take any interest in the farm. He could not accept it as it was.

A man in a long white shirt came towards them across the fields. He was the foreman in that block of the farm.

"Everything all right, Suleiman?" asked Ibrahim.

"Yes. Nothing amiss," said the newcomer, an elderly, frail-looking individual, with a stubbly growth on his pale-brown face, around the hollow cheeks.

"Have you had all those fields there drained?" asked Ibrahim.

"Yes; they are all dry now." Ibrahim gave him a few instructions and the man went back across the fields.

The party had now reached the little village where the farm population lived—a cluster of low, shapeless mud huts, with only skylights for windows, and narrow doorways that looked like the entrances to caverns. The substance of the walls looked wasted after the rains, and there were gaps and cracks in many of them.

"Can I look inside?" Betty asked, appalled at the sight.

"Oh yes," said Ibrahim, and they approached one of the open doors—a black, narrow vacancy in the wall, black with the darkness within and against the now fierce glare outside.

"Hoi!" called Ibrahim to the invisible, but there was no answer.

"There is nobody inside," he said.

Betty and then Jean peered into the thick-aired, smelly darkness, where all they could see were two small palm-matted beds on rickety short legs that bent inwards so that the bagging mattress of cord almost touched the ground, and on the beds a collection of twisted, grimy rags. Near one of the beds stood a tin abl-

tion jug in a patch of moist earth where water had been spilled.

"The first thing to be done," said Mahmoud, noticing the paleness of physical and mental sickness that had come into the two English girls' faces, "is to demolish these caverns and build human habitations in their place." He stood there, explaining how easy and cheap it would be, while a few children gathered around them. The very young ones were completely naked—their brown bodies powdered beige from the dust, but looking healthy and happy; the slightly older girls naked except for a waist screen of coloured leather straps that came half-way down the thighs; the older boys in pants only, happy, ready to smile through the dust on their faces.

"How would you like to have a school?" Mahmoud asked a group of the older ones. This was his second scheme.

"A school?" they repeated.

"Yes, a school here in the village for you."

"Good," they said with moderate interest, as though considering a dubious proposal. "We'll go to it."

"You lazy beggars," he said, piercing them with the mock-menace of a smile. "I believe you would rather play in the dust all day!"

"No, no," they said, baring their teeth in good humour, "we'll go to school."

Amin interpreted to Betty. Aisha and Badriya laughed. Jean watched the pleasant smile that had followed the earnestness in Mahmoud's face so quickly. Then she saw a young woman approaching them, carrying a baby at an amply exposed breast, so amply exposed that the roll of her belly with a gaping navel showed below the baby's foot. She passed Mahmoud and Ibrahim with complete unconcern. Jean and Mahmoud looked at each other, then quickly looked away again.

The coolness of the morning had now been completely whipped out of the air by the mounting sun, and Amin began to agitate for breakfast, saying that social reform had been adequately dealt with for one session. So they went back to the rest-house, and after breakfast Amin began to paint. He had put on that morning what he liked to call his *Quartier Latin* shirt—a vivid green, check-striped in red, and a tie that looked both in respect of colour and texture as though it had been made of lemon-peel. Now he took out of his bag and donned a studio-stained khaki cloak coming down to his knees.

"What are you putting that thing on for?" asked Mahmoud. "To preserve the purity of your shirt?"

"You're crazy," said Betty. "It's boiling hot. You'll suffocate in that atrocity."

"I can't paint in *négligé, ma chère*," he said.

"Oh, Amin, you look so funny!" said Aisha. "You don't look like yourself at all!" And indeed, though she did not know it, he looked extraordinarily French, assuming an imagined French personality because of the inseparable connection in his mind between painting and Paris. He erected his easel on the verandah, surrounded by orange trees, spread out his paints on a large table, and began to paint, looking absurdly, exotically impressive.

It was a few moments later that the others, sitting in the room, heard a commotion outside, as of many feet hurrying in the same direction.

"What's that?" asked Betty.

They all listened. There was an urgency in the heavy shuffling, coming towards the house. Then Mahmoud heard the voice of Ibrahim. Ibrahim had had breakfast with them, then had gone out again into the fields, only ten minutes before.

"No, no!" Ibrahim shouted. "This way. Not to the front door. Put him on the back verandah."

"The English ladies are here. Hadn't we better take him to the office?" said another voice.

Mahmoud went quickly to the window. Outside, at a few paces from the house, he saw Ibrahim with some ten or fifteen men coming towards him, and some way behind them an Englishman on a horse making for the office.

"What's the matter? What's happened?" he called to Ibrahim, and just then he saw another four men in the party, who for an instant had been concealed by a tree, carrying a man on an improvised stretcher. They were now almost at the house, and Mahmoud recognised the man instantly. It was Suleiman, the block foreman whom they had met in the fields an hour before. His eyes were shut, but there was no mistaking the stubbly beard around the hollow cheeks.

The party halted.

"There has been an accident," said Ibrahim. "It's Suleiman. He's unconscious. Shall we put him on the back verandah till the doctor comes?"

"Of course," said Mahmoud. "I'm coming." He ran out, saying to the others, "A man has been injured; you won't mind if we have him out here?" But a remark, a bitter brutal aside which another of the men had made was still ringing in his ears. When Ibrahim had said, "There's been an accident," one of the four

carrying the unconscious man had spat his contempt and said, "Accident what, brothers? He killed him!"

Mahmoud met the party just as they were coming up the steps with their load. Behind them a horde of children was collecting, edging its way to the verandah.

"Get away! Begone with you!" Ibrahim shouted at them, waving his arms as though to disperse a flock of fowls.

"Where's the injury? How did it happen?" asked Mahmoud, seeing no visible signs. The man's shirt was not even torn. There was no blood anywhere, no apparent fracture.

"It was Mr Rosslyn," said Ibrahim, "the public health inspector."

"He kicked him . . . he kicked him on his heart," said the man who had spat. "I saw it with my own eyes."

"It wasn't a kick," said an older, milder-looking man. "He got angry and let go with his foot in the stirrup, and it hit Suleiman."

"Shut up all of you!" shouted Ibrahim. "When you're asked for your evidence, you can give it." Unlike his men, he was conscious immediately of the awkward political implications of this horrible business. . . .

"Mr Rosslyn was inspecting the farm for mosquitoes—you remember my asking Suleiman if he had had all his fields drained? Well, he hadn't. There was a bad pool in them full of larvæ. Mr Rosslyn went mad when he saw it. He was on his horse, and Suleiman was standing close to him. He pushed Suleiman with his foot, and Suleiman fell and didn't get up again. When we picked him up he began to cough and a lot of blood came out of his mouth; then he fainted. Mr Rosslyn has galloped to the office to ring up the hospital."

"But he is alive?" asked Mahmoud. He bent down and felt the pulse. The others watched.

"Is it beating?" asked Ibrahim.

"God be my witness, it will never beat again," said the venomous spitter under his breath.

"I think so," said Mahmoud, imagining that he could just feel something, the flicker of a very distant life.

They heard a horse's hoofs and looking round saw the public health inspector coming back.

"Go and hold his horse," said Ibrahim to one of the men. The man moved reluctantly, saying to himself, "Why doesn't he betake himself and go away after what he has done? What is he staying here for?"

Mahmoud lifted the man's shirt. In the brown skin he could

see no discoloration at first, then he noticed, almost in the middle of the chest a few inches from the left nipple, a slight abrasion, and passing his fingers over it, felt a slight swelling. He pulled the shirt down and stood up as Rosslyn stepped on the verandah. The Englishman's face had no blood in it. But on his seeing Mahmoud rising, a weak hope breathed into it a little expression.

"Are you a doctor?" he asked.

"No," said Mahmoud.

"This is Sheikh Ahmed's son," said Ibrahim, indicating that the responsibility was not now entirely his.

Rosslyn took no notice of the introduction. He was a young man, of not more than twenty-eight, and in the youthful blue of his eyes Mahmoud saw a cold, sick fear—a fear which left him completely without authority. The other men, too, noticed this. Immediately after the incident, when they were picking their comrade up and putting him on the stretcher, the Englishman had been blustering, shouting truculent, impatient orders, but when he faced them now he was only a man in fear, without disguise.

"Is he still unconscious?" he asked.

"Yes," said Ibrahim. "Are they sending a doctor from the hospital?"

"It is better we take him there," said Rosslyn, "if a car is available. It will save time. The doctor may not be able to do what's necessary here. Is there a car?"

"I have a car," said Mahmoud.

"There's the Ford too," said Ibrahim.

"The Buick would be much better," said Mahmoud. "We could lay him almost full length on the back seat."

Then the screams of women burst upon them, coming from behind the trees, and three wailing figures, a woman and two girls, appeared running down the bank of the canal, the woman beating her head as she came.

"That's his wife," said Ibrahim. "Somebody's told her."

"We mustn't waste any time," said Rosslyn, feeling a new and horrible sickness at the screams, and looking mutely to Ibrahim to screen him from the woman, from the frenzy of her voice.

"I'll speak to her," said Ibrahim, advancing a few steps to intercept her.

"My man . . ." she wailed, beating her head. "They've killed my man. The son of the Nazarenes, the Englishman has killed him!"

"What's all this shouting for?" cried Ibrahim. "Nobody's killed your man. Who told you he was dead? It's only a simple injury,

pray God, and we're taking him to the hospital . . . he only fell down and fainted."

"Liars! All of you liars! Where is he? Where is my man?"

She came forward, still running and bawling her anguish—considerably amplified beyond its natural dimensions, as custom required from a respectable and loyal wife.

"Let's go and get the car," said Mahmoud to Rosslyn, seeing his horror at the woman's approach and wanting to get him off the verandah before she arrived. "This way." And he led him quickly inside the house.

All this had happened in barely a minute. Amin on the other verandah, unaware of anything, was blissfully building up the crimson texture of a slice of water-melon. Betty and the others in the room, not realising how serious the accident was, were talking and waiting for Mahmoud to return. Then they heard the woman's screams and became silent; and an instant later Mahmoud, having left Rosslyn in the passage, came in and told them that he was taking the injured man to the hospital and would be away about an hour. He just said a man had fallen down and fainted.

When he and Rosslyn got to the car on the other side of the house, they found Ibrahim and the others coming with the stretcher, followed by the woman and her two daughters, now only whimpering and mumbling after Ibrahim's efforts at pacification and the more or less natural expiry of the first *de rigueur* outburst. Behind them, too, the scattered urchins were collecting again in a steady, discreet advance, peeping to see the prostrate man.

Mahmoud pushed Rosslyn quickly into the front seat, and then saw the men settle Suleiman at the back. As they laid his head on the seat, there was a spasm in his throat and more blood came out of his mouth.

"His spirit has departed," said one of the men quietly.

"What are you taking him to the hospital for?" said another. "His place is now in the graveyard." All the men talked quietly, as though to themselves but not minding if the others heard.

Ibrahim took out a handkerchief quickly and wiped the blood away, saying, "As long as there is movement, there is life."

"Movement, what?" returned the man. "Do they call the gasp of death movement?"

Rosslyn looked ahead through the windscreen. With his little Arabic but alert sick ears, he heard and understood the conversation behind him.

Ibrahim sat on the floor at the back holding the man on the



seat, as the road was rough and the car bumped a good deal. Mahmoud was thinking of the Englishman sitting next to him who looked so afraid and pitiable, whose momentary brutality did not deserve this terrible punishment. And Rosslyn was thinking, "Great God, how can the bastard die? I only pushed him away with my boot. . . . What will they do to me for that? Is the law here the same as in England . . . for an Englishman?" Half an hour before his world was intact and rosy. He was going to the Club dance that night. After the last dance he had kissed Mrs Wheatly, taking her home in his car.

At the rest-house, Amin laying luscious daubs of paint on his canvas, became aware of excited chattering behind the orange trees. One remark pierced his ears.

"What was that you were saying?" he called to the man who had made it.

The man came and told him. "An English inspector kicked one of the men and they've taken him away dying. That's his wife sitting under the tree there, waiting for the news from the hospital."

Betty had come out on the verandah, and Amin told her what he had just heard. He pointed out the woman under the tree.

"Horrible!" she said. "How perfectly beastly." And then, "What a brute!" Her horror of imperialism, allayed by Sir William Carter's kindness, rushed back in one flood. An Englishman kicking and killing a native! Within a week of her arrival in the country!

"Let's call his wife and give her a chair here," she said. Jean had now joined them, followed by Aisha and Badriya. Betty poured out the story to her.

"Don't you think we ought to have the poor woman to wait in the house?"

"Certainly," said Jean. "If she will come. . . . What a dreadful business!" She felt a wave of sickness rise from the pit of her stomach, seeing the physical action in her mind more vividly than Betty, more as a scene than as a concept.

Amin put his brush down and walked to where the woman was sitting. She saw him approaching her from the verandah on which the two Englishwomen stood.

"Come and wait in the house, Auntie," he said. "It is better there. You can rest and have some tea, if you like."

"Thank you, my son," she said, "but I am all right here."

"But isn't it better there? You can have a chair."

She said bitterly, "Thank you, my son. I have seen enough of the English Nazarenes for one day. Is it not enough that an Englishman has killed my man? Do you want me to go and sit with his sisters too?"

"Why won't she come?" Betty asked him when he went back.

"She's not feeling very friendly to the English, just now," he said, "... men or women."

"Oh," said Betty, then added, "I don't blame her." She was ashamed of being white and English—ashamed before that woman under the tree, ashamed before Amin, ashamed above all before Aisha, who stood beside her more oppressed by her idol's distress than by what had happened to that poor man. . . . Turning round, she saw Amin's half-finished melon slice and felt a sharp impatience with art, with Amin's and Mahmoud's Oxford dilettantism, when their first duty was to free their country from colonial oppression. Art, philosophy, tinkering with social reform . . . how futile it all seemed when something like this could happen in the country!

They were all still on the verandah when Mahmoud came back.

"I'm afraid it was much worse than I let you understand before I went," he said. "I'm so sorry that our outing should have had such a close."

"Is he dead?" asked Betty.

He nodded. "He was already dead when we arrived at the hospital."

"Did the inspector go with you to the hospital?" asked Amin.

"Yes; we waited outside while the doctors examined him; then Rosslyn went to report it to the Commissioner of Police. . . . I must say I felt very sorry for the poor devil."

It took Betty a second to realise that he was referring to the Englishman. "I'm afraid I can't share your sentiment," she said. "I find what he did absolutely revolting—kicking a man when you're in authority over him and because you consider him your inferior."

"He lost his temper," said Mahmoud. "There's a bad malaria epidemic in the town, and anybody who allows mosquitoes to breed is a public enemy in the eyes of these inspectors. He was wild when he came upon that pool of larvæ after he had been assured that all the fields were drained."

"But he wouldn't have kicked him if he were an Englishman," persisted Betty, driving home the charge which no circumstances could mitigate in her eyes. "He kicked him because he was a native, and because as an Englishman he didn't feel inhibited

against kicking a native. That's what I find so horrible—the mental attitude." She turned to Jean: "Would you be so shocked if one Englishman kicked another? I shouldn't."

"I should always find it horrible whoever kicked whom," said Jean.

"What you say may be true," said Mahmoud, "but it isn't altogether the man's fault if he isn't as inhibited in the one case as in the other. It's natural."

"Oh, Mahmoud!" said Betty.

"Well, isn't it? How can you expect this Rosslyn to feel about a worker on the farm here as he would about an Englishman? Worlds of reality still divide them; worlds not of his making."

"But of the making of imperialism," she retorted, "and nationalism, and racial arrogance."

"Granted . . . but in the meantime it's very cruel luck for one individual in this set-up to find himself suddenly responsible for homicide just because he lost his temper and pushed his boot into somebody."

"Don't worry," said Amin. "They'll get him off somehow. I bet you anything you like it won't cost him all that much."

"But surely he won't get away with it?" asked Jean.

"He'll get away with it much more lightly than if he'd done it in England; or than if one of us had done it here," said Amin.

"That would be disgusting," said Betty.

Badriya and Aisha did not take any part in this conversation. They stood listening to the rapid exchanges, looking from the face of one to the face of the other. They understood the vocabulary in parts and the simpler statements of opinion. In the subtler arguments they were both out of their depth. But whereas Badriya, knowing that she would sink in those waters and indifferent to the thrills of trying, remained standing in her shallows, Aisha kept pushing out, managing sometimes to float for a while when her feet lost contact with the ground. Amazed, she sensed that Mahmoud was defending the Englishman and Betty attacking him.

"Will they hang the inspector?" Badriya asked.

Mahmoud explained to her in Arabic that there could be no question of that, because this was not murder. He explained the difference between wilful and accidental killing.

"Oh," she said.

Aisha, also in Arabic, asked:

"But if an Englishman kills a native wilfully, will the Government hang him?" She found herself touching new, strange questions, and was fascinated.

"They will say he's mad and send him home to his country," said Amin.

It was now time for them to go back. Amin started packing up his equipment. Even to him, the slice of water-melon did not seem so important after the death of that man whom they had seen alive only two hours before. The woman had gone from under the tree. Ibrahim had taken her away to tell her that her man was dead.

While they were getting ready to go, Jean found herself for a moment alone with Mahmoud, waiting for the others. She said:

"I think it was wonderful of you to be so sympathetic to that unfortunate Mr Rosslyn. Of course, he did a very brutal thing, and though it will be natural for the English to feel sorry for him, I shouldn't have been a bit surprised if you hadn't had a single word to say in his favour."

"You know," he said, feeling extraordinarily pleased by her praise, "it isn't really a question of English and native; it's a question of the abstract and the concrete. Betty didn't see this chap. She's only thinking of him as a symbol, thinking in concepts: he's British, he's an arrogant imperialist! . . . But I saw him, scared stiff and pitiable."

She did not say any more. The others came out just then. But the glow of admiration she felt for Mahmoud continued to warm her with a very pleasurable feeling, and she was glad she had been able to express it to him.

## CHAPTER VIII

SIR WILLIAM CARTER was in his office, going through a list of candidates for the twelve Assembly seats which were to be filled by Government nomination. Every now and then he bit on his extinct pipe and drew a heavy blue pencil across some name put up by one of the provincial governors. The governors' criteria were not always the same as his. The governors mostly favoured tame men of substance who could be relied upon not to be too enterprising politically, and Sir William was determined not to justify the nationalists' worst suspicions by filling his seats with men of this type.

He had just refilled his pipe in preparation for compiling his final list for the Governor-General's approval when the telephone rang. It was the Commissioner of Police.

The news he heard gave him a very unpleasant shock. This was the first time it had happened in the country, as far as he knew. In the whole length of his service of twenty-eight years no native had been killed by an Englishman. There was absolutely no precedent for procedure.

He thought rapidly. From the start nothing must go wrong, nothing be done that might seem to native opinion as an attempt to shield an Englishman from the consequences of his action just because the victim of it was a native. . . . There had been one or two cases of Englishmen, Government officials, being convicted of crimes against the Service—embezzlement, criminal breach of trust. They had been tried and sentenced to the appropriate terms of imprisonment, but as there was no suitable provision in the country for white prisoners, they had always, after serving a token period of a few weeks in a special section of the local prison, been sent home. But this was different and much more serious.

He rang up his legal colleague on the Governor-General's Council, and had a first, brief consultation with him. He told him that Rosslyn in his deposition before the Commissioner of Police had affirmed that he had merely wished to push the man out of his way; but that several witnesses had seen the incident, though their version of it was still unknown because the police had only just set out for the farm to collect the evidence; an English superintendent and a native police officer had gone out together.

"Of course," said Sir William, "there must be a normal trial. That is my immediate reaction."

"Unless," said the Legal Adviser, "it can be conclusively shown to have been no more than an accident. . . . This will depend entirely on the evidence of the witnesses, and on the post-mortem." Then he added, "It seems extraordinary that a normal person should have died in this manner."

Sir William then rang up the chief physician at the hospital and insisted that at least one native doctor should be present at the post-mortem. He pointed out that if only an English doctor did it, native opinion would not credit the result if it should in any way be favourable to Rosslyn. Lastly, Sir William got in touch with Rosslyn's departmental chief and instructed him to give Rosslyn a month's leave to commence from that day. He had himself already made up his mind that whatever the upshot of the case, Rosslyn could not remain in the Service.

While Mahmoud and Rosslyn had been waiting at the hospital for the result of the examination, Ibrahim had gone to report the incident to Sheikh Ahmed at his house.

Sheikh Ahmed, too, did some rapid thinking while Ibrahim was giving his account.

"You saw what happened yourself?" he asked.

"I saw it. I was standing at some distance."

"He kicked him deliberately? . . . Are you sure?"

"God be my witness, Sheikh Ahmed, he kicked him."

"It couldn't have been some sort of accident—the horse shying or something?"

Ibrahim thought for a moment, then said:

"Only God has the knowledge that is beyond error: I may have been mistaken, but it looked to me like a good, angry kick."

"Since there is a possibility of error, you need not say all this if there is an investigation and the police take your evidence. . . . Did many others see it, besides you?"

"Two or three men."

"And they all think the same as you?"

"If you ask about the thought in their hearts, I think they do, and one of them is not afraid to say it. But you know what most of our people are like: because it's an Englishman, they are nervous of calling the thing by its name."

"This is a very bad business, Ibrahim," said Sheikh Ahmed, "very bad politically. It will stir up so much hatred against the British and the Government; and just now that would be a very bad thing—very difficult for people like me who are convinced that co-operation with the British is to our country's advantage, who want to stand in the coming elections. If Suleiman is dead, it will boot him nothing to have the Englishman accused of killing him. And the whole thing may have been an accident, as you suggested. . . . Wouldn't the best thing be to treat it as such, and get a sum of money for the widow by way of compensation?"

"God be my witness, I think as you do, Sheikh Ahmed."

As soon, therefore, as Sheikh Ahmed heard from the hospital that the man was dead he went to see Sir William Carter, arriving shortly after the latter had been speaking to the Legal Adviser.

"I can't tell you, Sheikh Ahmed," said Sir William, "how grieved I am by what happened at your farm this morning."

"It was indeed very sad," said Sheikh Ahmed, ". . . but accidents will happen; horses can be very unreliable sometimes. I have just been seeing my farm-manager who was there when it happened, and I have come to suggest that Mr Rosslyn should be asked to pay a suitable sum to the poor man's wife. If Your Excellency could arrange this—say forty or fifty pounds. . . ."

"What did the farm-manager say? How did it happen?" There was an unexpected suggestion of relief in Sheikh Ahmed's words, but almost as soon as Sir William felt it he questioned its authenticity.

"Nobody quite knows," said Sheikh Ahmed. "The horse must have shied, and Mr Rosslyn's foot shot out or something, when the man was standing too close, so that he was knocked down. . . . Kisnet, Sir William, Kisnet." Sheikh Ahmed implied that it would be irreverent to pry any further into the ways and purposes of God. Then he added sententiously, his lids stretched out in maximum solemnity, "A very unhappy occurrence, but nothing which demands anything beyond the payment of the customary compensation."

Was that really how it appeared to the men who saw it, Sir William was urgently asking himself. Was that what Sheikh Ahmed believed? . . . Rosslyn had admitted a deliberate action, 'to push the man out of his way'. Had that been officially taken down, or was it still only a personal report that he had made to the Commissioner? And if so, would it be right to advise him to withdraw it until the evidence from the farm was brought back? Wouldn't the simplest thing, after all, be to let it pass as an accident if there was no allegation to the contrary? To test Sheikh Ahmed, he said:

"We shall know better what happened when the police have examined all the witnesses at the farm. They're on their way there now."

Sheikh Ahmed started. "Why have you sent the police? What need was there for a police investigation into a mere accident at a farm? . . . God be my witness, Your Excellency, the Government is too scrupulous sometimes, and you make it difficult for your friends to help you."

"But there must be an investigation. Mr Rosslyn himself reported the incident to the police."

"And what did he say?"

Rejecting now with a firm decision Sheikh Ahmed's friendly offer of collusion, Sir William said:

"He admitted that he wanted to push the man out of his way."

Sheikh Ahmed shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if Your Excellency insists on bruiting it to the whole country that an Englishman has kicked a native to death, don't blame me for the consequences."

"I know you are trying to be helpful, Sheikh Ahmed, and I am grateful. But it won't do to hush this matter up. If Mr Rosslyn

caused the death of a native by kicking him, the worst thing would be for the Government to shelter him because he's an Englishman. An act committed by one Englishman does not besmirch the Government or the English people, but official tampering with justice would."

The evidence which the police brought back left no room for doubt that the men who saw Suleiman fall all knew that Rosslyn kicked him. Ibrahim, according to his compact with Sheikh Ahmed, was non-committal, and he was sophisticated enough to maintain his vagueness under interrogation. But the bags in which the other two were trying to keep the cat concealed were only too transparent, and a few questions were enough to tear them quite open. And there was the man who spat.

It seemed quite obvious to Sir William, when he read the report which the Commissioner brought him in the afternoon, that Rosslyn had killed the man, and that his culpability, on a manslaughter charge, would be considerable. At the same time, a trial was now imperative; there could be no question of treating it as an accident.

An hour later, the chief physician rang him up.

"I have before me the report on the post-mortem," he said. "It's rather an extraordinary case. The man died of lung hæmorrhage from an unhealed tubercular cavity."

"Provoked by the kick?" said Sir William.

"Only very indirectly and possibly not at all. The impact of the kick was extremely slight. It could not possibly have caused death in a normal person. It may have helped to bring on the hæmorrhage, in itself or by causing the fall, but it was a hæmorrhage certain to come sooner or later, judging by the state of the lung tissue. Also, the man's general condition was very weak. That's why he fainted immediately. He may have fainted from the kick or from the fall, but that had nothing to do with the cause of death."

"What a bloody odd coincidence!" said Sir William. "Is that the opinion of both doctors?"

"Yes. Dr Zeyd fully concurs with Mortimer."

The native doctor, standing beside his British chief at the post-mortem, saw exactly what the latter saw. The tubercular condition of the lung, the hæmorrhage from the cavity, were clear beyond all question. And the mildness of the injury from the kick was also clear. So that when Mortimer had said, "It's obvious what killed the poor-devil," the native doctor had had no hesitation in agreeing. But he knew at once that his honest medical opinion was going to be questioned by many people. That was the curse of his



country, the curse of a country under foreign rule. Politics and political suspicions came into everything. If you didn't always take the anti-British line you were a traitor in the eyes of the nationalists. People wouldn't believe him; they'd think he had been afraid to speak the truth, to contradict his British superior. They'd go about whispering that he had prostituted his integrity.

He came out of the post-mortem feeling very unhappy, resenting having been made to take part in it, as though he had been trapped. Sir William Carter was always preaching to them the value of moral courage in their position, but, blast the man! he didn't realise what all this cost them; he didn't realise how you were made to end by doubting your own integrity when so many people around you doubted it . . . how even now he was beginning to wonder sickly whether he had not subscribed to Mortimer's views too tamely. Was he really convinced that that kick would not have killed a normal man? Would he have come to that conclusion on his own? Had he thought of it before Mortimer spoke the words?

Irritated and confused, he went home, only to feel more irritated by the blare of jazz coming from the British club dance across the road.

This was the dance which the unfortunate Rosslyn had been looking forward to in the morning, but which he had had to forgo, not only to the chagrin of Mrs Wheatly but also to the scarcely milder disappointment of Mrs Beresford-Jones. True, Mr Rosslyn's position in the Government was not an exalted one; he was not a member of the political service, and even among technical posts his was undistinguished. But his social vintage was not inferior. He was an Old Salopian, and had come to the country and taken that job only because he liked an outdoor life and big-game shooting. He was young, good-looking and had all the social graces. And Lady Jupiter, in her middle forties, liked to surround herself with young, good-looking and socially-graced males. Jack Rosslyn was one of her favourites, an aide-de-camp at functions like club dances.

The news of his misfortune had not reached her when she came to the club. The afternoon in the town was a slack time for the circulation of news. When something happened in the morning, the news was flashed from office to office, and the husbands brought it home when they came at two o'clock. But in the afternoon the offices were shut, the central nervous system was dormant; people were either indulging in a siesta at home or scattered without any means of communication over the many

and varied fields of sport. By the time the Rosslyn incident had become known at the hospital and at police headquarters, it was nearly the end of the morning; and Mrs Beresford-Jones had been out sailing all the afternoon.

The first time or two she asked those around her, with a sweeping look across the grounds, "Where's Jack Rosslyn tonight?", nobody was able to tell her; and Mrs Wheatly, who heard the second query as it hummed in her own impatient breast, pretended not to have heard and looked in the opposite direction with a decisive semblance of detachment, afraid that the beating of her heart might become audible.

It was only after the third dance that the rumour began to spread. It reached Mrs Beresford-Jones via Peggy Miller, who had picked it up from Mrs Charlton, the wife of the Governor-General's private secretary. The Beresford-Joneses, the Millers and the Major-General were sharing a table, and Peggy Miller brought the staggering news when the company reassembled for the interval.

"How rotten for the poor boy!" said Lady Jupiter. "What a horribly unpleasant thing to happen!"

"Deuced awkward!" said the Major-General.

"I suppose they'll have to pack him home now," said Beresford-Jones. "Poor Jack!"

"Why pack him home?" asked Lady Jupiter, startled. The possibility of any consequences, apart from the temporary disagreeableness to Jack of such a beastly thing happening to him, found her imagination unprepared.

"Well, I mean . . ." ventured her husband inconclusively through his walrus moustache, wondering whether he had expressed too extreme a view.

"I should have thought a transfer to the south for a few years . . ." said the Major-General, offering a reasonable compromise. One of his officers in India once . . .

"My God, I know how infuriating these natives can be sometimes," said Miller. "The number of times I've felt it would do me good to kick some of them! . . . Crazy, they drive you crazy, with their negligence and cool, insolent indifference."

"Oh, please don't, darling," said Peggy. "I don't want us to be packed home." Then she added, "And I don't think it's British to kick an underling."

"I think it would be monstrous if the poor boy's career were to be broken because of a wretched thing like that . . . because he lost his temper from zeal in doing his duty." Lady Jupiter had

never thought of Jack Rosslyn's job as a 'career' before, but the word came now with a dramatic fitness not to be denied.

"A transfer for a couple of years and it'll all be forgotten," the Major General assured her again.

"He could get all the big-game shooting he wanted in the south," said Beresford-Jones, dwelling on the bright side of things.

Peggy Miller had been wanting to ask a question for some time, but had been afraid to. Her instincts told her it would be somehow gauche. Yet surely it had a relevance, it wouldn't be a stupid question to ask. . . . At last, she popped it out.

"But isn't this manslaughter?" she asked.

Simultaneously the band struck up for the next dance, and the only answer she got was Beresford Jones's "May I have the pleasure of this one?"—while the Major-General bowed to Maria, and Freddy Miller stepped to the next table to keep an engagement with Jean Bannerman.

They all came back to the table before Maria. The Major-General was escorting her back when she saw Mrs Charlton at the other end of the floor, and wanting to ascertain the facts Peggy Miller had reported at second-hand, she left the military gallant on his course and swept along towards her.

A moment later she came back.

"Would you believe it?" she said, even before reaching her seat. "William apparently is talking of a trial. . . . He went and saw H.E. this afternoon."

"A trial?" said her husband, not only astonished himself, but dutifully answering her demand for universal astonishment.

"Yes. He wants Jack tried on a manslaughter charge!"

"Seems a bit too drastic," said the Major-General. "Deuced awkward!"

"I mean . . ." said Beresford-Jones, who always in moments of crisis found the aposiopesis a helpful form of speech.

"Really . . . ?" said Freddy Miller.

Peggy alone in the company remained silent, seeing that she had not been very stupid to ask that question.

"Isn't it too utterly unthinkable!" said Maria. Then remembering the perpetual compromise she had to observe between her detestation of William Carter's policy and her desire for the prestige which his friendship gave her, remembering that she must never condemn him to the extent of damaging his prestige-value, and, above all, that she must maintain the pretence of indulgent intimacy, she said:

"But one can't go entirely by what Helen says. If only William

himself were here! How tiresome of him that he doesn't come to club dances. . . ." Then looking at the Major-General and feeling that she had gone too far, she added, "Though I don't suppose he'd want to discuss it at the club." She hoped the Major-General would not cavil at the suggested accessibility of Sir William to her on some more private terrain.

"I doubt if H.E. will agree to that," said her husband, having had time to formulate a completed thought. "I mean, the political unpleasantness of having an Englishman tried for killing a native! Sir George can't allow it."

"My dear," said his wife, who could not pretend to the same intimacy with Sir George as with Sir William, and certainly could not call him by his Christian name, "what William decides usually goes. Don't you know that?" After a moment she added, "And I suppose we're becoming used to unpleasantnesses. Haven't you seen our mixed couple yet?"

"Oh, have they arrived?" asked the Major-General.

"Have *you* seen them?" asked Peggy, quite interested. "What's she like?"

"I'm afraid I didn't notice," said Lady Jupiter.

"Where did you see them?"

"Along the river front. They were walking arm in arm. I found the sight so repugnant that I instinctively turned away."

"I should have been very curious to see what she looked like," said Peggy.

"I don't care what a black man is like, nor where he's been educated," said Maria. "I find the sight of his skin next to a white woman's intolerable. There's the indecency of something unnatural about it, and a white woman who places herself in that position seems to me depraved."

"Apparently William was at the station when they arrived," said Beresford-Jones, "and he made quite a point of letting everybody see him greeting them."

"Dear William!" said Lady Jupiter. "If he didn't have a bee in his bonnet about spoiling the natives, he'd be our greatest colonial administrator. . . . I quite expect him to be asking them to dinner next."

Jean Bannerman, sitting at the next table with her party, overheard the last part of this conversation. Lady Jupiter's views on the juxtaposition of the black male and white female skins burned in her ears like a personal insult, and she flamed with a hatred for their author which startled her with its violence. Then she remembered what Mahmoud had said about the abstract and the

concrete. . . . Would this limited, stupid woman continue to feel as she did if she knew Amin and Mahmoud as individuals instead of thinking of them as 'black men'—if she'd heard Mahmoud's civilised, oh so civilised talk in the morning about that poor man?

The next day Judge Shendi was summoned to the Legal Adviser's office. When he arrived he found the Attorney-General there too. The two men rose to greet him, and for a moment the room brightened with the rollicking good humour which every room experienced when the judge entered it. Then they sat down, and the Adviser began to talk in his thin, precise manner as though his tongue were etching in metal. The judge was informed that on the evidence before the Attorney-General it was proposed to prosecute Rosslyn. He was also informed that it was proposed to set up for the trial a special court consisting of an English president and two native judges of whom he would be one. Would he be willing to serve on the court? It was the wish of the Government that the matter should be dealt with normally, as a straightforward case.

He thought in puckered silence for a moment, then said:

"If I may be allowed to state my opinion . . ." And looked from the one to the other of his superiors. The Legal Adviser was slim, poker-faced and bald. The Attorney-General was slimmer and very tall, with a long, straight nose and an ostentatious look suggesting that he was just about to throw his chest forward and say a ringing 'thank you' to some discomfited witness. In girth, the two of them together did not approach the spread rotundity of the judge.

"Of course, of course," said the Adviser.

"In view of the result of the post-mortem," he began; "really, Your Excellency, it doesn't seem to me that a prosecution is necessary."

"But it's still manslaughter, Judge Shendi," said the Adviser, with his ruthless precision of voice and accent.

"By Your Excellency's leave," said the judge with a look of shrewd, extra-legal wisdom, "I think the technicality may be waived. . . . You say the Government wishes it treated as a straightforward case, but it cannot be. Trying an Englishman for the manslaughter of a native can't be a straightforward case. It is bound to be very awkward for everybody concerned . . . everybody—and the doctors' report gives ample justification for dismissing the whole thing quietly by getting Mr Rosslyn to pay blood-money and then, perhaps, finding him a job elsewhere." Like every senior native

official, the judge could speak to his chiefs not only in his technical capacity, but also in his capacity as a native giving political advice on matters affecting the relations between the English and the native public.

"But wouldn't this procedure, even if permissible, leave nasty suspicions in the public mind? Suspicions which only a trial could obviate?"

"Your Excellency, I speak frankly: the trial may confirm these suspicions. The ill-disposed will suspect whatever you do; and if there are to be suspicions, it's better they should not come near the courts."

"What do you mean, Judge Shendi?" asked the Attorney-General with some acerbity.

"I mean, sir, that it is quite conceivable now, in view of the doctors' verdict, that Mr Rosslyn will be acquitted if tried; that it may be the proper thing to acquit him on the evidence . . . or to impose a nominal sentence."

"And people will think it a dishonest decision?"

"They will, Your Excellency."

"Even with the court constituted as we propose?" asked the Attorney-General, flashing at the judge an incipient challenge.

"With a majority of native judges," added the Adviser, giving precision to his colleague's reminder.

"Even so, they will. . . . They will even if all three are native judges."

"Do I understand, Judge Shendi, that you would not be willing to sit on the court?"

"Your Excellency, I'd rather be excused."

"Is it necessary to be so sensitive to public opinion when one is satisfied in one's own mind that one is doing the right thing?" asked the Attorney-General archly.

The Adviser, who was more tactful and also more understanding, said, quoting one of his favourite maxims:

"Perhaps the judge feels that it is not only necessary that justice be done, but also that it be manifestly seen to be done. . . . You don't think it will be in this case?" He thought he knew what the judge was thinking: a phoney trial on the basis of a medical report so extraordinarily favourable as to be bound to seem phoney.

"That is my feeling, sir."

"Is it only public opinion that deters you?" asked the Adviser slowly, seeking to convey a meaning which he found it indelicate to put into words.

"I speak frankly again," said the judge. "It is not."

"I'm glad you're not lacking in candour, Judge Shendi," said the Adviser, slightly taken aback at the big man's bluntness. "Your frankness gives me the opportunity of being equally frank with you, without suggesting anything indelicate. I want you to feel absolutely certain that this is not an attempt by us to use native judges in order, at one and the same time, to appease native opinion and ensure a favourable issue of the trial."

"No, no! God forbid that I should think that of you, Mr Gairmine. . . . I know you wouldn't want me to be anything but impartial."

"Well?"

"I don't feel in my own mind that I could be, that I could reach a natural decision. . . . One way or the other, my mind would be troubled."

"Then you definitely refuse?"

"I ask you not to press me, Your Excellency. If you must have a trial, let it be English judges. But I still think it is better not to have a trial at all."

That became also Sir William Carter's conviction when the above interview was reported to him. His first doubt had arisen when the chief physician informed him of the post-mortem result, not because he thought a prosecution was no longer necessary, but because he immediately feared that it would now be misinterpreted. He had wished that the doctors' report had not been so favourable, did not sound—damn it!—as though it had been specially concocted for the purpose of getting Rosslyn off! Judge Shendi's reactions now settled the matter. It would be wrong to expose native judges to the suspicion that they had taken part in a bogus trial. And without native judges, a trial ending in an acquittal or a nominal sentence would look even more bogus. A little administrative sleight-of-hand was preferable to that.

Osman had from the beginning maintained that there would be no trial, that somehow or other the Englishman would get off. On the day, therefore, that the Government's decision was announced, he arrived at the club in the evening with the press office hand-out in his pocket and more triumph in his heart than he had dared to hope for. From the doorway he heard the rattling of dice, and saw the broad acreage of the judge's back bent over the marble-topped table. At the opposite end sat Mustapha Effendi, calm, urbanely defiant. Around them the circle was larger than usual that night: it included, apart from the doctor and the other regulars, Mah-

mound, who as a potential Government official had already joined the club, where he could meet his friends in greater freedom than at home.

"Come on, dice!" roared the judge, warning the little cubes for a crucial throw with a slow, caressing rattle in his loose fist. "Fetch it, dice: three and one!" And he launched the propitiated messengers of chance just as Osman arrived. All eyes followed their short, tumbling career, and then a gasp went up: Three and one it was! The judge thundered his triumph and banged his two counters into the position held by Mustapha Effendi's unprotected pawn, flinging it out as though he had cracked its skull.

Mustapha Effendi appealed in speechless dignity to the spectators to witness and remember this outrage of fortune.

Osman sat down and ordered a lemonade. He sat next to Mahmoud and at some distance from the doctor. This was the first time the doctor had seen Osman since the post-mortem. Osman gave him a malicious grin as he sat down, and the doctor was afraid. In his paper, of course, Osman had to be careful. The case was *sub judice*, and there was the law of libel. But at the club he wouldn't care. The doctor looked round and saw a number of ardent young nationalists sitting close by. Osman would have plenty of support. . . . Damn it, why should he be afraid of them! Even if it was Mortimer who had said it first, it was true! He could not but agree with him. The man had died from tubercular hæmorrhage. The kick didn't kill him.

"Hoi, Mahmoud," said Osman, seeing Mahmoud also for the first time since that incident; "there's plenty of irony in the world, isn't there?"

"How?" said Mahmoud.

"Your father is such a lover of the British, and it would be one of his men that Mr Rosslyn pitched on for that little demonstration of gratitude. God be my witness, it was very tactless of him. He might have chosen somebody else to kill with a kick. . . . If he had chosen me, at least the Government would have gained something and he would have got off just as lightly."

In the short pause that followed the penultimate sentence, a pause which the doctor felt was bitterly aimed at him, he was quickly debating with himself whether to pick up the gauntlet immediately or to ignore this first fling of it; and he was on the point of saying, "It wasn't from the kick the man died," when Osman relieved him by himself skating away from the challenge on another sentence, as though he had not quite intended it.

"Has he got off?" asked Mahmoud.



"Of course he's got off; fifty pounds' compensation to the man's wife, and the termination of his contract . . . here's the press office statement."

"Let me see," said the judge, turning away from his game. Osman handed him the sheet of paper. Mahmoud and a few others looked over his shoulder as he read. When he finished, he passed the paper to Mustapha Effendi, and after a preliminary puckered "M'm," pronounced:

"It is not unreasonable . . . in the circumstances, the best way out."

"Glory be to God!" said Osman. "Even the judiciary says so! Why don't we pack up and return to the jungle, then? The jungle which the British claim to have brought us out of!"

Again the doctor felt reprieved for the moment. He hoped the argument would develop along legal lines between Osman and the judge, that the medical evidence would be skirted. His loose limbs relaxed slightly in their ill-fitting sockets.

"If you want the truth," said Mustapha Effendi with great sedateness, ". . . quite reasonable. It is best so. Let him compensate the poor woman and go back to his country; we don't want anything more of him."

"What is this talk, brothers?" said a short, bespectacled, owl-faced nationalist on the other side of Osman. "How 'best so'? How 'reasonable'? If an Englishman is not tried for killing a native, it can only mean that the English are above the law here, or that our lives count for no more than the lives of flies. If this isn't slavery, what is?"

"I conjure you by the Prophet, Shendi," said Osman, raising his arm in sacred challenge, "if a native is brought before you tomorrow on a similar charge, will your conscience permit you to send him to prison? . . . and, by God, don't tell me that it will, because if that's the kind of conscience you have, then you don't deserve to be a judge!"

"It depends," said the judge, taking up battle-stations and projecting a powerful look at Osman, "it depends entirely on the evidence and the medical report . . . who told you that I shouldn't have acquitted Rosslyn if I'd had to try him. . . . And I will tell you this: if a native comes before me tomorrow in exactly the same circumstances, I will acquit him!"

"Would there necessarily be a prosecution if it were a native and the circumstances identical?" asked Mahmoud.

"No . . . not by any means!" said the judge. "Not if all the circumstances were the same."

"They would not be the same," said Osman, shaking his head and turning it aside as though speaking to himself with a meaning which the others might or might not guess.

"How?" said the doctor, knowing that his turn had come. "What do you mean?" His thin, long neck pivoted nervously towards Osman, stiffening in its socket.

"Only that a native would not be so fortunate as to kick some body who apparently was already dead and merely waiting for someone to bring it to his notice! The stars in their courses don't take all that trouble for one of us."

The words were still veiled perhaps, but the sarcasm of the voice pierced.

"I don't like that insinuation, Osman," said the doctor. "What are you trying to suggest?" The fragile dignity his gauntness had in repose began to crumble as the excited, high-pitched words broke out of him.

"Never mind, never mind," said the judge. "He's not trying to suggest anything."

"Yes he is! You know very well he is," cried the doctor, his sharp adam's-apple bobbing agitatedly . . . "and I won't let it pass!"

"They know because they all in their hearts think the same," said Osman. "I'll cut off my right arm if they don't!"

"Think what?" asked the doctor.

"Nothing, nothing," said Mustapha Effendi. "Nobody thinks anything. Be quiet, Osman!"

"No! Let him speak," cried the doctor. "Let him speak openly and not by innuendo!"

"Brothers! Brothers!" appealed the judge. "What's the reason for all this anger?"

"The reason . . ." squawked the doctor, looking more and more like an angry, long-necked bird, "the reason is that Osman is impugning my integrity . . . my professional integrity and my patriotism! He thinks I put my signature to an untruthful post-mortem report in order to save the Englishman. . . . Let him swear this wasn't what he meant!"

"I didn't mean to accuse you personally," said Osman, feeling that at least an oblique withdrawal was necessary, a withdrawal which would nevertheless allow him to make his point.

"Whom do you accuse then?"

"I accuse your superiors. I grant your position may have been very embarrassing. I know it isn't easy for a subordinate to contradict his chief. The chief says, 'Don't you think so?' And unless

you're very sure of yourself and can make up your mind instantly, you agree; it's natural. He doesn't openly ask you to perjure yourself, and you wouldn't if he did. But he can, if he's unscrupulous, inveigle you into acquiescence. And God be my witness, I believe you were inveigled, Zeyd."

"I wasn't inveigled into anything, and Dr Mortimer is not unscrupulous. Every statement in that report was true. I don't allow you to question it. I don't——"

"It is very improper of you, Osman. You have no right——" began the judge.

"No right? . . . But I have a thousand rights. . . . Was that a medical report or a speech for the defence? Brothers, a man is kicked and dies immediately, and you want me to believe that everything under the sun was the cause of his death but that kick? A good hearty kick from a man in riding-boots? Glory be to God, if you want to be believed, don't presume too much on the credulity of your audience." The young nationalists sitting around smiled with delight at the felicity with which Osman had expressed the universal doubt. Several rows of white teeth appeared in the gathered facial blackness, and heads swayed to varying degrees of scepticism.

Mahmoud felt an urge to come to the doctor's rescue, and not just by telling Osman to shut up, like the others, who apparently—even the judge—half agreed with his doubts, but were merely shocked at the impropriety of his voicing them and wished to avoid a scandal. Mahmoud felt that the doctor was telling the truth in the face of devastating odds. He said, "From what I saw, it was not a good hearty kick. What surprised me was that such a mild injury should have knocked the man out."

"But you didn't see it happen, did you?" asked the owl-faced nationalist.

"I saw the man when they brought him unconscious to the rest-house. I lifted his shirt and could see no sign of the injury at first. There was no blood, nothing broken . . . it was a very slight bruise: not at all the kind of thing you'd expect a healthy man to die of. . . . I find the medical verdict convincing."

"Tell them so; tell them!" said the doctor. "Perhaps they will believe now."

The owl-faced man's lips moved while the doctor was speaking, and though veiled by the shrill voice of the latter the words, intended only for Osman, drifted into Mahmoud's ears: "You're become half-English yourself now; no wonder you're quick to defend them."

"People should either not speak their thoughts, Mukhtar, or have the courage to speak them loud enough," said Mahmoud.

"I'm not afraid to repeat them loud enough," retorted the bespectacled owl. "I say you tend to be too charitable to the English because you have been educated by them!"

"It's not being charitable," said Mahmoud. "It's being only fair, and if you suppose that British universities today only turn out imperialists and stooges of imperialism, you should meet Amin's wife."

"Yes, by God!" said the judge, shaking his head in warm confirmation and a sort of astonished reverence. "She is harder on her kinsfolk than any of you firebrands here. . . . such a hater of imperialism! Truly an admirable and amazing girl!"

"God be my witness, it is true," said Osman. "I've talked to her." Then his excitement melted away in a long, chuckling laugh, through which his next words came in spasms of delight: "Would you believe it, brothers, she was so extreme, that I almost found myself defending the Government—I!"

Good humour reasserted itself. Everybody laughed, including the doctor, Osman looking hugely amused at his confession. The judge and Mustapha Effendi resumed their game.

Then owl-face said, "Pray God, she doesn't change when her people have had time to talk to her. Many of them are quite nice when they first arrive. . . ."

"You needn't fear, my friend," said Osman. "Her people won't talk to her: she's married a native. It'll be good enough if they nod to her in the street."

## CHAPTER IX

SIR WILLIAM knew that Betty could not belong to the English community of the town. She could not come to the club. She could not slip normally into the circle in which English life moved.

Ninety-five per cent of the British in the town, particularly on the female side, lived entirely within that circle—the circle of tennis, golf, swimming, bridge, dances, drinks and meals—with people who were exactly like themselves. They had neither the inclination nor the time to get out of the circle to meet people who were not exactly like themselves in status, tastes or idiom. Their engagement books were filled weeks ahead. The men had their books at their offices and the women at home. Telephones rang the whole morning . . . "We'd love to, old man, but may I just

confirm with Sheila that it's O.K. by her . . .", or, "That would be heavenly, darling, but I must just ring up Tom to make sure he hasn't gone and booked it for something else." With those ninety-five per cent Betty and her husband obviously had no future. But there remained the five per cent—the college tutors, a few enterprising bachelors, and even couples here and there who did not allow the circle to absorb them—who liked to be original and explore a little outside it among the small cosmopolitan population—mild eccentrics, left-wing idealists, rebels against the traditional insularity, late-comers to the country who had knocked a bit about the world and become de-tribalised. With some of them the Shendis could have a limited social life. It was the object of Sir William's small tea-party to introduce them to the most promising of these 'possibles'.

In making his selection, he consulted Jean Bannerman as to whether Mahmoud's wife should be included in the invitation to her husband. He knew she had been to England and that she was sometimes seen out with her husband in the town, and thought that if Mahmoud was trying to lead a modern married life, this would be a good opportunity for him and his wife to be introduced to the same small circle of English people who might be responsive. Jean assured him, from what she knew, that there would be no impropriety in his inviting the girl; and Sir William was delighted when writing out his invitations to be able to say—what had never been said before in an invitation to a native—"you and your wife."

"What would I go with you for?" said Badriya when Mahmoud told her. "You go by yourself."

"But you must come," he said. "The invitation is to both of us." He showed her the letter.

"I can't talk to English people as you can," she said. "Even when Amin and his wife are there and you all talk English, I don't understand and I don't know what to say." She only sounded uninterested, not resentful or complaining, but her mere position—the circumstances that made her say that—struck a tender chord in him. She could still look very appealing to him in her brainless loveliness, standing alone on the other side of the gulf that divided them, accepting the position as natural, when he was always straining to draw her across. He strained again now, kissing her and saying gently:

"Never mind. Come to please me. You'll find it difficult now, but it will get easier bit by bit. Each time you will understand a little more; you'll get used to English talk."

He thought he had got her to stop using the offensive greasy hair scent, but when he kissed her now he smelt it. He didn't know whether she still used it in secret sometimes, or whether it just clung to her from her being so much with the other women.

She noticed the sniff he gave after kissing her and the look of displeasure that came into his face. She said:

"I don't want to come. You go with your friends and let me be with mine."

"I have you used that scent again, Badriya?"

She did not answer.

"I told you I didn't like it."

"But all the girls use it. I can't be different from everybody."

"But you are different. You're not veiled. You're not locked up. You've been to England. . . ."

She began to sob.

"Don't cry," he begged. "Don't be angry. I'm not scolding you; I'm just talking to you. . . . Never mind about the scent."

"It isn't only the scent," she sobbed. "It's everything. . . . I am not an English girl; I can't be one, and you try to make me one. Why did you marry me if you wanted an English girl for a wife? Why didn't you marry an English girl, like Amin? Go and marry one. . . . Marry Miss Bannerman."

"I didn't want to marry an English girl. I don't want you to be an English girl. I only want you to come and go with me, and mix with my friends."

"I can't do that. You know I can't. You and your friends are clever and I am not. I don't try to keep you at home. Why should you want to drag me out?"

Himself miserable, and pitying her for this sudden, startling anguish of a conflict he had scarcely suspected, he said no more about the party. He would go by himself. He would accept on her behalf, so that it should not seem to Sir William as though she were a harem girl, after all, and then go alone and say she wasn't feeling well.

Betty had been in the country for a month and, apart from seeing Jean Bannerman twice, she had not had any English company. The world she was living in was a queer, lopsided world, a world without women, a world of male strangers, many of whom did not even speak English. Social life at her father-in-law's house consisted entirely of visits by men—often a stream of them coming in the evening and sitting round in a circle. Many of them

she liked—she had enjoyed talking to Osman immensely, and she found her brother-in-law, the judge, lovable. But she was lonely, miserably lonely at times if Amin wasn't there, often lonely even if he was there and they sat in the big room in the midst of that large crowd of men. It was better when they remained alone in their room or went out for walks by themselves. The harem atmosphere in the house oppressed her, and apart from Aisha the women were a dumb race to her. She could never belong to their world, even when she knew enough Arabic to be able to speak to them.

Of course, things would be better when they had their own house. They would be able then to organise their life; they would be independent and have their own circle of friends. And she was going to work herself, when Amin got his job in the Government; she was going to collect material for an economic and social survey of the country to be published by the Fabian Colonial Research Bureau.

For some time she would not admit to herself that she was homesick for English company. She fought back the bitter, furtive nostalgia from the threshold of consciousness; then something happened to send it crashing past. She had gone out with Amin for a walk, and coming round the corner of the British club she saw a group of English women standing at the gate about to go in, waiting for a fifth woman who was still getting out of her car. A gust of their voices and laughter—the first collective sound of English speech she had heard since her arrival in the country—struck her as the five women walked in and disappeared. They had not seen her and Amin. She did not know who they were. But the abrupt sound, experienced for a moment and then lost, the dying echoes of their intimate laughter behind the club wall, pierced her with a sharp pain—the pain of a child with whom the other children did not want to play. . . . She pressed Amin's arm in hot, shamed loyalty, quickening her pace . . . they were probably unpleasant children, and she wouldn't like them if they were to play together . . . their political views would be ghastly—friends of that brutal inspector, no doubt . . . wouldn't be at all horrified by what he had done, but horrified she had married Amin. In another spurt of loyal love, she slipped her hand into his and squeezed his fingers.

"Why have you become silent all of a sudden?" he asked. They had been talking about the house they were to get and furnish shortly.

"I'm just thinking," she said, and he felt the tension in her

manner. He too had seen the English women and heard the delight of their laugh together—that was the kind of thing he had wanted to avoid by living in Paris, that and what he had noticed a few days before when they were walking along the river front, and that tall, offensive-looking Englishwoman had turned her face away the instant she saw them.

After a moment he said:

"You're sure you wouldn't prefer that *petit appartement* in Montmartre? . . . It's not too late, you know."

"Nonsense," she retorted. "*J'y suis, j'y reste. Nous restons. Vive la patrie!*"

The badinage in French covered up her malaise, but that night she remained awake long after he had gone to sleep. They had the roof to themselves. The women were sleeping in the harem courtyard below, and her father-in-law on the verandah. As she felt her husband's mind slipping away from her into slumber, her loneliness became intolerable and choked her with tears.

When they received Sir William's invitation the next day, Betty was more pleased than she cared to let Amin notice, and her consternation was great when, screwing up his face dubiously, he said:

"Do you very much want to go?" He had no idea the party was being given on their account, thinking it was one of the Chief Secretary's semi-official tea functions, and that there would be a large, unsifted crowd of British officials and their wives.

"Why shouldn't we go?" she asked, hurt but unwilling to betray her disappointment. "Don't you like him?"

"Oh, he's all right, but we don't know who'll be there."

"Don't you want us to get to know any English people?" she said, swallowing a chunk of her pride.

"Of course, but I should prefer to know beforehand who they were going to be. This is probably a garden party, and there'll be all sorts in it." He wondered whether Betty had seen that tall Englishwoman when she averted her face from them on the river front.

"Don't be silly. It's a personal invitation written by hand. It can't be a garden party."

She was angry with him for forcing her to show her keenness to go.

He screwed up his face again. "You go by yourself," he said. "That probably is the intention of the invitation."

"Why are you being so horrid? It's a perfectly friendly, straightforward invitation to us both . . . but of course, if that's the way you feel about it, we needn't go."



His uneasiness, his sensitive resistance, was infecting her, bringing back the memory of what she had felt on the train when all those pairs of eyes followed them to their table in the dining car. . . . Perhaps she would feel like that again in an English gathering. She certainly would if he was going to be so self-conscious himself. She wouldn't be able to feel natural unless he did too, and oh! the humiliation of not being perfectly natural about their position—that was the only humiliation in it, to give the impression to her countrymen and countrywomen that she was ashamed of what she had done.

She got up and walked into their room, leaving him sitting alone on the verandah, angry with him for letting her down, for threatening to spoil this first opportunity that was being given them of meeting English people, but most of all for compelling her by his resistance to realise how desperately eager she was to meet English people now. Not to be absorbed into the conventional English life of the town, no, God forbid! But to meet a few nice, interesting individuals, such as there must be in the town, such as she felt sure they would meet at Sir William's. . . . And how discourteous it would be, what a cold answer to all his kindness to them, to decline his invitation—to decline it from embarrassment about their position when it was imperative to behave without embarrassment from the beginning if their life in the country was not to be impossible. She was frightened to have caught from Amin for a moment that infection of self-consciousness—the horror of incipient leprosy.

The weakness of her position with him was that it was her choice to live in the country, not his. He could always say to her, 'I didn't want to come; I warned you!' But he wouldn't. He hadn't said it on the train in their first panic. He had been very sweet. He wouldn't say it now either. He wouldn't say, 'I thought you didn't care about English company.' He was too kind to throw back a thing like that in her face. . . . There was no reason why they shouldn't have English company as well as native—the right kind of English company.

On the table by her bed the edge of her father's letter protruded from the book she was reading—the first letter she had received from him since her arrival in reply to her first epistle about the country. She pulled it out of the book and read it again: '. . . I am delighted to know you are happy and like the country and the people so much in spite of the strangeness of a life without women as far as you are concerned. . . . I hope you will make individual friends before long. . . . You may go through a difficult time when

the excitement of adventure has worn off and before the comfort of familiarity has set in; it would be wonderful if the one just took over from the other, but it doesn't usually. . . . I have greatly taken to your Sir William Carter from what you tell me of him. . . . The President Hoovers and Sammy McCreedys are still in full splendour, but the Crimson Glory is packing up. . . .

She put the letter back in the book and rose with a sharp impatient movement, going to the door. Instead of sulking and feeling sorry for herself, she should be talking frankly to Amin, telling him everything she had been thinking.

She met him at the door coming in, and his arms closed round her. They stood for a moment in a speechless embrace, feeling their oneness together and their loneliness in the world.

"I am a little coward, Bettitchka," he said, "unworthy to unlace your boots."

"I don't wear boots," she said, laughing.

"You come here and confront my whole tribe—you sit round with them for a month and out-stare them all; and I'm scared of going with you to drink tea with half a dozen of your people. . . . Though even there you have more reason than me to feel embarrassed."

"Amin dear, neither of us must feel embarrassed. To feel embarrassed is to deny everything we believe in, to bow to the stupidity of everything we despise and know to be false."

"Yes, Bettitchka."

"And you'll come?"

"Yes." He looked at her with a large and happy smile, fringed with mischief. "And will you now do something to please me?"

"What?"

"Sit for me."

"Now?"

"*À l'instant*. . . . I want to paint you looking angry."

"No!"

"*Femme aux yeux verts, enragée—avec justification—de son mari*."

"I wasn't *enragée*!"

"*Avec justification!*" he insisted with pointed finger.

The party was a great success. The guests had been chosen with discrimination. Miss Bannerman was there, and two tutors from the college, the head of the C.M.S. mission and his wife, a nurse who was related to Sir William, and a couple of cosmopolitans who had lived in France, taught English in Egyptian schools in Cairo

and were distinguished authors in Esperanto. The husband was an Englishman with a trim ginger beard and the wife a Swede.

Sir William showed them round the garden, with Betty walking at his side, telling him where she lived in England, and about her father and his garden and the Crimson Glories and President Hoovers.

"Are you an expert on rose names?" he asked.

"I know quite a few," she said. "You can't live with Father and remain ignorant on the subject."

"Then when the winter comes and mine are in bloom again, you must come and tell me what they are; and if I have any President Hoovers, we will change the name by deed poll."

"Political objections?"

"No. Entirely facial. Roses should be only called after women--some women."

"How about Lady Jupiter for one?" said the younger of the two college tutors, smiling with the gratification of a fourth-former at being in the know concerning the Head Boy's pranks.

"These under-strappers," said the Head Boy, "will get me sued for libel one day. It's just as well you don't know what he means."

"But I do know," said Betty. "I heard about it in England."

"Lord, how this world is given to spreading scandal and evil report!" he said; then added quickly, looking at the wall, "but mum's the word! We're practically on the slopes of Olympus here."

Mahmoud found himself walking next to Jean Bannerman behind the others. He was happy now, not regretting his wife's refusal to come. He knew that he had not wanted her to come because he was likely to enjoy her company on an outing like this, but only for the satisfaction of their going out together like a normal couple, and so that he should not feel awkward when arriving by himself at a gathering where all the others would be accompanied by their wives. . . . But perhaps she was right, after all, and he had been unrealistic. Perhaps this was the most sensible thing to do—let her be, keep his marriage in a domestic background, and make his own life outside it. She had said, 'Go out with your friends and let me be with mine'. She had said . . . They were crossing the lawn, coming back to where the chairs and tables were set for tea. He was still walking beside Jean, a few paces behind the others. Ahead of them were Amin and the two Esperantists, talking about Paris. Sir William with Betty and the missionary's wife

were in front. Mahmoud, on an impulse, had just said, "You know, you look exactly as you did the day you arrived in London. You were carrying this bag and wearing the same hat, weren't you?" And she had thrown her head back, smiling, and said, "Was I? I suppose I was." It was at that instant, as their eyes met, that Badriya's angry words, "Go and marry Miss Bannerman", echoed in his mind. And because the Englishwoman was looking straight into the pupils of his eyes when the words rang out behind them, he was overcome with a great confusion and dropped his gaze instantly, as though if he didn't for another second she would see his thought.

Amin and the Esperantists warmed rapidly to each other in the glow of their love for Paris, and Betty, chatting to Sir William and the college tutors, was delighted to notice the happy ease of his manner. Paris, like painting, had brought out that odd, assumed French personality in him, in which he seemed to be more at home, more himself in essence, than when he was just his normal self—his normal self which was indistinct, in which the African-Arab foundation and the English superimposition blurred each other. Soon he and the Esperantists were dropping into bits of French, discussing Matisse, then art in general, and the problems of native art and taste in the country. This last subject drew in the college tutors and Sir William.

"Our problem," said Amin, "is that our old art, such as it was, is dying out, and we have no taste yet in any other medium. We never had any architecture or painting or sculpture, but we had our crafts and made some beautiful things—the earthenware coffee-pot, for instance. Now we're not making coffee-pots any more, because we get cheap porcelain ones from Japan, with tawdry gilt circles on their sickly white, and the people don't see that they are hideous. It's a new medium and they have no habit of good taste in it."

"It isn't only a local problem," said Sir William. "Under the first impact of the Industrial Revolution our Victorian ancestors in England developed very questionable tastes in furniture and the arts."

"What I should like to see," said Mahmoud, "is some attempt to make things in a new way but with an African inspiration—new things growing up from our own soil and suited to our sky."

"Such as what?" asked the lady Esperantist.

"Such as houses," he said. "Can't we have a new type of village mud house, African in conception, using only local material, cheap enough to be within everybody's means, but

designed attractively and so as to let in enough light and keep the heat down to a minimum?"

"An admirable idea," said Sir William. Then the college tutors, "I think your school of design might do something like that."

"What about you?" said Jean to Amin. "Can you get ideas from pictures to rural architecture?"

"Do you paint yourself, then?" asked the miss.  
"A little."

"That's a splendid idea," said Betty. "I think you should combine over his scheme for rebuilding the school. You design the new ones. Would you like him to show you?"

"What scheme is this?" asked Sir William.

Mahmoud explained his scheme modestly—the school, the dispensary, some adult education classes.

"Who will take these adult education classes?"

"Myself, and one or two friends who have volunteered."

They all listened, impressed, and Jean feeling a little envious. Mahmoud glowed at the admiration which she showed for the others.

Amin, Betty, and Jean accepted Mahmoud's scheme, and as Sir William was seeing the four of them, Betty said to him:

"I have a little scheme of my own, Sir William. I should be grateful for help from Government departments to approve of it." And she told him of the survey she was compiling for the Fabian Bureau. "Is there anything you are doing that?" she asked.

"I should be very glad to see you do it," he said to her at my office one day, and we'll have a talk about it. You were secretly troubled by Sir William's effect on her enormously, and while with him she found it in the ill of the Government, of this particular section of the Empire; but she was determined to be on her guard and to find out how genuine his liberalism was."

It was a matter of choice for Mahmoud whether Amin and Betty first, or Jean Bannerman. The school, where she lived, were about equidistant from opposite sides. His first thought, dictated by its naturalness, was to drop Jean first. Then it occurred

he could reverse the order, and he became conscious of an extraordinary agitation, so much so that his heart began to beat frantically as he approached the fork at which his first destination must be decided. He almost hoped that she would save him from the ridiculous pain of having to decide by settling the issue herself, saying something about being late and asking to be dropped first. But she remained silent, sitting beside him on the front seat, and when the fork came into view and she had not spoken, he swung the car into the direction of the Shendis' house, exhilarated with his success at the moment of decision.

"Oh, I thought you were going to drop me first," said Jean; and the words covered him with confusion.

"I'm so sorry," he said, "are you in a hurry? Shall I turn back?"

"Oh no. It's quite all right. Don't turn."

"I thought it would be easier to reach the school by the back road from Sheikh Ayyoub's house," he said, inventing glibly.

The distance from Sheikh Ayyoub's house to the school was not quite a mile, and it only took Mahmoud three or four minutes to cover it after they had dropped Amin and Betty. For a moment neither of them spoke, then Jean said:

"What a shame Badriya wasn't able to come. I do hope she will be feeling better tomorrow."

"There's nothing the matter with her. She just didn't want to come." It was to tell her this, to confide his trouble, that he had wanted to be alone with her for a few moments. She felt the note of confidence in his voice, a confidence of loneliness and helplessness far greater than could be explained by the bare fact he had disclosed. She said, "I expect she's not used to the idea of mixed parties yet." And she was about to add, 'she's very young, after all', but stopped herself in time, doubting the tactfulness of the remark, and substituted, "It can't be very easy for her at the beginning, you know; but it will come gradually."

"I am afraid it's gradually becoming worse," he said. "Ever since we came back from England it has been one steady retreat. . . . Oh! Miss Bannerman, it's so difficult to fight against environment and atmosphere. I know it isn't her fault, but what am I to do?"

"Couldn't you take her abroad again next summer?"

Next summer Badriya was going to have a baby, but he was ashamed to tell Miss Bannerman that yet, ashamed that she should know he had so far collaborated in this child marriage of his as to allow his wife to become pregnant at the age of fifteen, when at least he might have made sure that they didn't have any children

until she was a little more mature in mind. He said:

"It isn't the place you go to for a holiday that makes you what you are, but the place you live in."

"But you have so many schemes for reforming the place you live in. You will reform it in this way too; I'm sure you will. With your sincerity and determination you will succeed."

"It's very nice of you to say that."

"I mean it."

After a moment, he asked:

"How's she getting on with her lessons?"

"As a matter of fact, I've been wanting to talk to you about that. I am not sure that it isn't a mistake for her to continue to have lessons with me. You see, I was her school-teacher; as long as she has lessons with me she is apt to go on thinking of herself as a child, and that's exactly what you don't want now. Wouldn't it be better if she had the lessons from you?"

"I should hate her to lose touch with you."

"But that needn't happen at all. Of course I should continue to see her." She spoke with a quick, reassuring warmth, anxious that he shouldn't feel she was deserting him in his struggle.

They had reached the gate of her house in the school enclosure, and Mahmoud got out quickly to open the door for her.

"Come in and have a drink," she said, as naturally as she would have done if an English friend had given her a lift home at that hour. She had often had natives in her house before—parents of pupils, town notables interested in the school, coming to tea, but never one by himself, dropping in casually as a friend—yet she felt no strangeness about it.

He hesitated in some embarrassment, wanting to but uncertain whether the invitation wasn't mere politeness.

"Thanks very much . . ." he began, "but . . ."

"Do," she said, and he knew that she meant it. He followed her into the garden, where the usual settee and two or three chairs with the round low table in the middle were set out on the lawn for the evening. The sun had just set and a limpid orange glow held the western sky for the few moments of tropical dusk. In the east one or two bright stars were beginning to prick their way through a hard steel-blue ceiling. That always was the magic moment of the African day, when the world released at last from the long fierce clutch of the sun sank abruptly into a tremendous hush of relaxation.

"Sit down," she said. "I'll just pop in and take off my things."

This was the first time he had been to her house alone, the first

time he had ever been in a house alone with an English girl in his country. It wasn't the kind of thing that happened in the country, it had probably never happened to a native before. The thought of this new intimacy pleased him immensely, and his eyes remained fixed on the door through which she had entered, waiting for her to come out again.

They did not revert to the subject of his married life over their drink, but found themselves talking about Amin and Betty.

"I think she has done a very brave thing," said Mahmoud.

"And seems to be making a success of it. I am so glad for them."

"What do the English people here in general think of her?"

"I don't think there is much of a collective reaction, you know. Sir William and the progressives admire her. Some find it strange, but are not unsympathetic. Many are just indifferent."

"And the true blues?"

She laughed. "Well, you know what true blues are like."

After a moment he said, "How did you feel about it when you first knew? Did it seem to you very strange?"

"It did for a bit. . . . Didn't it to you?"

"Yes, it did," he said, wondering whether the strangeness hadn't been different to her, hadn't been the strangeness which shocks or disgusts.

"But I'm not a true blue, you know," she said, smiling. Her eyes became very intimate when she smiled and the simplicity of her face gained a penetrating sweetness.

"Nor quite a revolutionary."

"No. Only a mild liberal." Then after a pause she asked, "And how do your people feel about it? Do they approve?"

"It's quite surprising how naturally they take it . . . and of course as an individual she's made a tremendous hit. Everybody likes her, delighted to find her so free from arrogance and such a champion of nationalist aspirations."

"So anti-British, you mean?" And they both laughed.

"No, no . . . she's not quite so anti-British now as when she first arrived—not quite so convinced that everything the British are doing here conforms to her preconceived ideas of imperial wickedness; nor that everything we do is right. She's come up against conservatism in our ranks."

"And vanquished it magnificently in the Shendi family. Do you know that she has persuaded Sheikh Ayyoub to let Aisha go to the secondary school?"

"Wonderful!"



"Her influence on that girl—the mere effect of her presence—even in these few weeks has been astonishing."

"The women will learn a lot from her when she has learned enough Arabic to be able to speak to them; there's plenty of scope for adult education in the harem."

"She's learning it already, isn't she?"

"Oh yes; she's having regular lessons with Amin."

"That reminds me that I shall soon have to start having Arabic lessons again. I've only learned colloquial so far, but the Director wants me to sit for the higher standard examination in two years' time, and that means classical."

"Who's going to teach you?"

"I've no idea. Can you recommend anyone—someone with more forbearance than learning, if possible? I'm not very good at languages."

He felt the same excitement which he had experienced a few moments before at the fork of the road. He said:

"Would you like to let me try?"

"You! No, of course not. I wouldn't dream of it." She sounded quite startled by the idea, and as though shying away from it on an impulse prior to thought.

"Why?" he asked. "Do you rate my forbearance so low?"

"No, no. But your time is too valuable. You've got so many more important things to do." She was sure he wouldn't accept payment, and she couldn't possibly accept the generous gesture he was making.

"I'd be very happy to do it. I mean that . . . I like teaching." He added the last sentence as a cover for the more intimate attraction he found in the prospect, and which he feared might have come out too much in what he had just said.

"You like teaching philosophy," she said, "not A.B.C." And again he saw that shaft of sweetness in her eyes when she smiled.

"Well, we can always include some of the Arab philosophers in our curriculum. . . . There's Averroes and Ibn Khaldoun. . . ." They began to laugh; then he said, "Quite seriously, though, I could easily spare the time, and I'd like to get you through the higher standard."

"I really couldn't accept such a sacrifice of your time."

"It needn't be a sacrifice. We can put it on a business basis."

"I don't believe you mean that. I've come to know something about Arab generosity and the kind of tricks it plays."

"I promise there'll be no trick in this. If your wish is to make all your Scottish ancestors turn in their graves by insisting on dis-

embarrassing yourself of superfluous cash, I'll take it at the prevalent market rate for Arabic lessons and put it into the funds of my farm school."

"Oh, that's a very nice idea, but—"

"If you refuse to employ me now, you'll be injuring the school."

"It's really very sweet of you."

"When do we start?"

"Not for a few months. I can't manage it till after this term."

"That'll give me time to polish up my Arabic grammar."

"Have another drink to seal the contract . . . or are you in a hurry to get back home? Perhaps you'd better go; Badriya will be waiting for you." The fact that she was a few years older than he, that he had just ceased to be an undergraduate, and that she was Badriya's teacher, made it possible for her to say that to him—to withdraw the offer of a second drink after it had been made, and tell him it was time for him to go home, feeling sure that he wouldn't mind it.

"Yes, I think I'd better go." He rose quickly, and she walked with him to the gate. As they shook hands she said:

"Don't get dispirited. Things will improve." She waited while he started his car, then waved him away, calling after him, "Give my love to Badriya."

Things had already improved! He drove his car along and swung it round corners with a new joy. The promise of regular, frequent visits to Jean Bannerman in the months ahead filled him with happiness—and when his loyalty to his young wife protested, the happiness silenced it with vehement assurances that it was only a happiness of the mind, of understanding friendship; things he could not find with his wife and which she would not grudge him having with someone else. Hadn't she told him to do that when they had received Sir William's invitation?

Badriya was alone when he arrived. There was no bevy of friends and cousins in the house, as he had expected. She was sitting under the light on the terrace and had a book on her knees. He recognised it as *The Children of the New Forest*—one of several juvenile English books he had bought her in England, and which since their marriage she had scarcely ever looked at.

"Reading?" he said with surprise and tender approval, as she looked up from the book a little confused, an expression of striving hope in her eyes.

"I've read five pages," she said.

"Good!" He came and sat down beside her on the settee, moved by the pathos of her struggle, of her desire to please him by im-

proving her English, of her being alone on the terrace when he arrived. Remorse stabbed him at having taken the left limb of that fork in the road.

"Did you enjoy the party?" she asked.

"I should have enjoyed it more if you had come," he said, picking up her hand and stroking it. But there was no reproach in his words, only a desire to caress and please her. The emotion of the moment reached back transfiguringly to the afternoon, so that he believed himself when he said that.

"You are not still angry with me because I didn't come with you?"

"No, no I am not angry." But even through the tender kiss he gave her he was aware that there was more than one reason for his not being angry.

## CHAPTER X

THE summer and the rains ran their course, and the very hot season, dropping some twenty degrees of its *110*, gave way to the hot season—the brief winter whose coldest days stood, by the thermometer readings, well within the margin of an English heat-wave, but had a spurious coolness of contrast which sent people gleefully to their wardrobes looking for their forgotten pullovers, and which caused Sir William, rubbing his hands vigorously as he arrived at the office in the morning, to say, "I want a transfer to the tropics."

In the gardens, the orange and scarlet embroidery of the golden mohur was gathered from the trees, and the winter avalanches of purple bougainvillæa fell down the walls. The river, shrunk from its turbulent chocolate immensities, lay, a placid filtered blue, low and cosy between its high banks, so that when the queenly native boats came sailing past even their high masts did not top the edge.

Many beds came down from the roof to the verandah and later crept in from the verandah to the bedroom, for the nights could be cold, with a clean cutting edge. The English sleepers of the town fell into two classes—the nostalgic and the spartan. The former seized the first opportunity of a little coolness to hie them indoors, where in the darkness of a rooted-over bed you could imagine yourself to be sleeping in England. But the spartans, the potential ice-breakers in the Serpentine, held out on the roof, spying out the neighbourhood on getting up each morning in the

hope that some weaker competitor might have been compelled to acknowledge defeat and their own superiority. Lady Jupiter experienced one of her rare triumphs against Sir William when he had disappeared from the roof about the middle of January, just about the time that his servant Bibiki began to roll his turban lower and lower over his head so as to cover his ears and the nape of his neck—the natives' main defence against the morning winter chill.

Sheikh Ahmed, after some initial resistance, had agreed to Mahmoud's reform schemes for the farm. His conversion was completed when his son's arguments were reinforced by certain considerations that began to occur to him, namely that the rebuilding of the huts and the starting of a school would be good propaganda for him with the nationalists in view of his decision to stand for the Assembly—and with the Government too. The Governor-General might be invited to visit the new village . . . the visit might be followed by an M.B.E. He had enough money now, he wanted prestige and political prominence. A few thousand pounds spent to that end would be a good investment . . . and, anyhow, who said that he wasn't progressive, open to liberal ideas? Why had he sent his son to Oxford if not to have him come back with such ideas?

Amin and Betty were now established in their own house—a bungalow on the river bank outside the town, not far from Sheikh Ahmed's farm. An old Danish couple had built it many years before, and lived in it, making cheese and farming a few acres, until old age compelled them to leave the country. This happened as the Shendis were looking for a house, and Betty, hearing about it from Mahmoud, had gone out immediately with Amin to see the place. It commanded a splendid double view at a bend in the channel, and looked on to an island of silver sand in the middle of the stream. The Danes were asking only three hundred pounds for it, and Mahmoud reckoned that another hundred would restore it from the dilapidated condition into which it had fallen as a result of its owner's failing strength and interest. It had many attractions, but the one that appealed to Betty most of all was its being out of the town and the prospect it offered them of making in it their own life, independent of either community. They had taken it and bought a car, and gradually their life was taking shape. Amin had been given a job in the Administration and Betty was working on her survey. Since the tea-party at Sir William's they had been to tea or dinner a number of times with English friends, and many people from the town, native and English, were coming to visit them at their bungalow.

Amin had also become interested in Mahmoud's idea of a model village for the farm, designed in a neo-African style. He made a number of designs, and towards the end of December they started building the first hut.

The five pages that Badriya had read of *The Children of the New Forest* on the day of Sir William's party had not shown much tendency to increase, and when the lessons with Miss Bannerman ended and Mahmoud tried to give her some himself, he saw before long why Jean had relinquished her task, so that he did not offer much opposition when the mothers and grandmothers protested against this taxing of her mind during pregnancy. He gave up the attempt, knowing that with the coming of children it could never be renewed, and that the grand piano, which had recently arrived and been installed in the *salon* with much ceremony by his father, would remain only an article of furniture. The guilt-pricked loyalty he had felt for Badriya that evening after his drink with Jean Bannerman remained for some time, even enhanced by his discovery of the final limits of her educability and by the thought of her youthful pregnancy with a child for him. When her belly began to rise, the sight of the disfiguring circle breaking the graceful rhythm of her body, yet holding for a time some of its daintiness, cut him with a new edge of pathos. He surrounded her with attentions, and rarely went out without bringing her back something—bottles of scent, fruit, sweets and all the illustrated papers he could find. These she liked, and would spend hours gazing at the pictures in them. When she recognised a picture of some part of London she had seen, she would show it to her friends, explaining it, telling them what she had done there.

For some time after Sir William's party he did not meet Jean Bannerman. Though she had said that she would continue to see Badriya after the lessons stopped, week after week passed without her visiting them. And he made no attempt to see her. He tried not to think of her, and at moments panicked when he remembered his promise to teach her Arabic, almost hoping that she would forget it, dismiss it as a passing pleasantry and engage some other teacher when the time came.

Sometimes he wondered why she was not coming to visit them, whether it was only a rush of work at the beginning of the school year, or some other reason—a reason which he suspected and feared. . . . Had he shown too much desire for her company, for intimate friendship with her that night, and had that displeased her?

When it was only another week till the end of her term, till the time when she would be ready to start her lessons, the fear that she might choose to forget his offer and bestow the favour on some one else, came upon him with an unmasked impact and filled him with misery. It came upon him one day when he was with Amin and Betty at the farm seeing the first hut being finished.

He finished his day at the Lum in something of a rush, and came back to the town, determined to see her at once. Naturally, it was for him to renew his offer now that the time had come; she might find it indelicate to remind him. Thinking that even now it might be too late, he stepped hard on the accelerator, raising a whirlwind of dust behind him.

But when he reached the town his determination began to sicken with timidity at the thought of calling on her again so long after their last meeting. He felt that a tension had grown out of those past weeks during which they had not met, and though he continued to drive in the direction of the school he knew in his heart that he was going to lack the courage to go in. He slowed down when he reached the school enclosure. The foot on the clutch went right down, the other played with the brake as he came to her gate . . . and then the gate was behind him. He passed on, miserable at his failure, but recovering rapidly by telling himself that she might not have been at home, or that she might have had friends with her, so that it wouldn't have been a suitable time for him to call. Perhaps it would be easier to ring her up and arrange a meeting, or to call at her office in the morning. He could pretend it was to consult her about something in connection with his farm school, and casually revive the subject of the Arabic lessons.

As he was garaging his car, he heard voices on the verandah and his heart gave a jump. More than pleasure, more than embarrassment, he experienced a superstitious start at the strangeness of that reciprocity. As though by mutual agreement, they had stayed away from each other for nearly two months, and now, at the same hour, almost as though . . .

He found her with his father and Badriya. Badriya's pregnancy was now so conspicuous that he had no doubt she would have noticed it even if they hadn't told her, but Sheikh Ahmed, of course, missed no opportunity of telling everybody that his first grandson was on the way.

"I thought you had forgotten us," said Mahmoud reproachfully.

"Oh no! I've been meaning to come for a long time, but somehow I've been rushed off my feet lately. . . . You've been pretty busy too, from what your father tells me. How are the huts going?"

"Splendidly. The first one is almost finished. . . ." While he told her about the work and what the hut looked like, and what Amin looked like designing the huts, in his beret and the fringe of beard he had begun to grow, he was trying to make up his mind whether to remind her of the lessons in the presence of his wife and his father, or wait until he could see her alone. Of course, Badriya would have to know sooner or later, and there was absolutely no reason why she should mind. In fact, the best course was to announce it as a matter of general interest when they were all together. He said:

"But I haven't forgotten my other obligations. I was thinking only this morning of asking you when you wanted to start the Arabic lessons." Then before she could answer, he turned to his father and Badriya and explained in Arabic, "I have undertaken to make Miss Bannerman pass the higher standard examination. She's going to have some lessons with me."

"Good, very good," said Sheikh Ahmed. "Pray God, it may help to repay the debt we owe you, Miss Bannerman. . . . But it won't; this lad's Arabic is not good enough. You'd better have your lessons with me!"

Badriya laughed, saying, "Funny, my teacher becomes your pupil!" And Mahmoud was relieved to note her amusement and glad that he had opened the subject before the two of them. The frankness of the whole proceeding and the approval of his father and his wife would surely reassure Jean.

"Look here," said Jean, "you mustn't think I came here today to claim my pound of flesh. Really I didn't. You can still back out. I think you should, with your work at the college starting this month."

Then she appealed to Sheikh Ahmed in Arabic, "Don't you think he'll be busy enough without taking on this task?"

"Busy what?" said Sheikh Ahmed. "Playing with Amin Shendi at hut building on the farm, teaching the tenants things they don't want to learn? Teaching you will be a much more useful occupation."

"It's really very noble of you," she said; "but I make one condition."

"What?"

"I will come here for the lessons."

"No, no," said Sheikh Ahmed. "Impossible. He' will come to you. He's got a car and you haven't."

"No, really, it's a very short walk, and I shouldn't mind it a bit."

"Miss Bannerman, in our country this can't be permitted. He

will come to you." An appeal to the sanctity of local custom was Sheikh Ahmed's final resort against English friends demurring to his kindness.

"I think we must accept my father's decision," said Mahmoud, delighted at the old man's intervention. It would be much nicer to go to her place; he would feel freer to talk to her there; but his shyness would have prevented him from pressing the point himself even on the ostensible grounds of courtesy, because he feared to betray any eagerness for the greater intimacy her place afforded and which she perhaps wished to avoid by suggesting their house.

When he was taking her home in the car (again on Sheikh Ahmed's insistence), she said to him:

"You must be feeling very happy that you are soon to be a father." Somehow she wasn't sure that he was, but she wanted to suggest it to him, to suggest that his married life would be entering a happier phase, that he would be finding more interest at home.

"Yes, of course," he said hastily, and craned his neck forward as though some traffic complication ahead was demanding his full attention.

Badriya treated the lessons when they began with the same indifference as she showed towards all his outside activities. Like the hut building and adult classes at the farm, like his work at the college, the teaching of Miss Bannerman was something that took place in that part of his life which—like every wife she knew—she expected her husband to live alone. When he left the house he went into a world to which she did not belong. She expected him to spend a good deal of his time in that world. All the men did.

As her pregnancy advanced, her withdrawal from the life he had tried to bring her out into became more complete, and she was relieved when little by little he ceased to resist this withdrawal. She was unaware that his waning resistance, that his increasingly positive acceptance of her attitude, had anything to do with Miss Bannerman.

In him the awareness was intermittent and wore many disguises. Badriya's natural acceptance of the lessons gave a sweet licence to his conscience, though an underlying sensitiveness remained, a fear that the acceptance might be withdrawn, and still more that if it were withdrawn his defence would be lacking in candour. When he was at home his kindness to Badriya became tinged with a new kind of indulgence, which he half-recognised as being a form of conscience-money.



Sometimes she would ask him casually how Miss Bannerman was getting along with her Arabic, and he would answer in the same manner. But all the week he waited for Monday and Friday evenings to come, and everything else he did glowed with a new intensity of interest because of the strange cataclysm of those two weekly hours, hours which often stretched to seventy-five or eighty minutes, because there was always something else to talk about besides Arabic grammar—the progress of the school at the farm, his new experiences at the college, the start of the philosophy lectures, the books they had both been reading, the films at the local cinema. But he was always afraid that she would become uncomfortably conscious of his hunger for her friendship (for he still refused to think of it as anything but friendship); of his alacrity on arrival and reluctance to leave, with all the pleasure and excitement that filled the space in between. So he was scrupulous in giving her full sixty minutes of tuition every time, and in never allowing the lesson to slide from its place as the paramount object of his visit; and sometimes, especially if he felt that he had stayed too long the time before, he would rise and leave as soon as the hour was over. But even when they only discussed broken plurals or terminal vowels he was happy, and found that sweetness could come from Arabic grammar even more easily than from the carcase of a dead lion.

She always began by asking him about Badriya, and often led the conversation round in an encouraging and cheering vein to his home life, praising Badriya's sweetness and beauty, and implying by gentle teasing how much she took it for granted that he was deeply in love with his wife. He continued for some time to feel embarrassed by her frequent, natural enquiries about Badriya's condition and her playful references to his approaching fatherhood. At last, when she had succeeded by the ease of her manner in overcoming his embarrassment, or perhaps from a desire to achieve a greater intimacy with her by confessing his more intimate thoughts, he said to her one day:

"I was afraid you'd be shocked to know that my wife was going to become a mother at fifteen."

"Of course not," she said, with an emphasis which perhaps lacked complete integrity.

"But she is too young, isn't she?"

"I have a cousin who married at seventeen and had her first child before she was eighteen, and in England girls mature much later than here." She knew that an English example, an example connected with her, would please him, would help his self-respect.

For some time he had had a desire to tell her how he had been married, to let her know that the marriage had not been of his own choosing or timing. He said:

"It was never my intention to marry so early . . . or one so young, but these things happen to you here whether you want them to or not."

She had gathered from Sheikh Ahmed's confidences that day at Oxford that there had been some trouble over the marriage, but the story she heard now for the first time—the manner in which his consent was alleged to have been given, the conclusion of the marriage without his knowledge, the receipt of his father's letter announcing it—amazed and outraged her. She listened with tense sympathy, and he, sensing the effect of his words, seeing it in the fixed gravity of her eyes as he spoke, went on to tell her of his first despair, then of his revolt and demand for a divorce the day they arrived in London, and of his father's distress and his own reluctance to inflict such a blow on him. He made a lot of his affection for his father and of the effect the old man's distress had on him, so that his ultimate acceptance of the position should seem to have been mainly due to that cause rather than to any other.

"And that's how it happened," he concluded.

"But it has turned out different from what you feared," she said. "You're very fond of her now, and that's the only thing that matters."

"Yes, of course."

"You're a very lucky man, you know," she said, smiling the tenseness away from her face because she was beginning to feel uneasy in this atmosphere of prolonged intimacy and decided suddenly to disperse it. "She's a most beautiful girl; quite the belle of the town. If I were a man, I should feel very proud to be married to a beauty like her . . . and I bet you are."

He smiled, his manner, too, changing abruptly, but he knew that her last remark veiled a new depth of sympathy in her which his story had touched, and he left her feeling strangely happy because he had told her all that.

When he was gone, she went back to some school papers she had been correcting, but her mind kept wandering back to what he had told her, and she found herself again and again dwelling on a disturbing question: why had he told her? Only because he liked confiding in her, or to clear himself in her eyes of the apparent stigma of choosing to marry, after a Western education, a brainless child-wife? Or had he any other motive? She recalled

the conversation they had had about Amin and Betty the first time he had come to her house, his asking her whether their marriage had shocked her. . . . But more than by any thought which she could put into words, she was troubled by a sense of atmosphere, and she wondered till late in the night whether she had made a terrible mistake in letting him give her lessons—whether her fondness for him and her desire to give him the friendship he so much wanted might not be recoiling on them in an utterly unforeseen way or, to be exactly truthful with herself, in the way she had vaguely feared after Sir William's party. She waited with alert instincts to see what he was going to be like the next time.

But as though he had divined her fears, when he came again his behaviour was quite natural; so far from creating an atmosphere that she was completely reassured and glad to be able to dismiss her fears, because she too found pleasure in their friendship and enjoyed the lessons and hated the thought of anything happening that would bring all that to an end.

## CHAPTER XI

THE jubilant preparations for a birth in the country lie perforce under the threat of sudden collapse into anti-climax—the sort of anti-climax that would descend on a party promised with the royal presence if only an A.D.C. were to turn up. The assembled female throats waiting to emit their lulus of joy at the first sight of the male insignia remain silent, and the knowledge that the newborn is without them is instantly transmitted throughout the house by the sudden hush—so proverbial that the coincidence of a universal cessation of speech in a rowdy party is described by the saying 'A girl is born'. After this first moment of general vocal paralysis come embarrassed, apologetic shufflings and the undertones of oblique felicitations. Attention is immediately transferred from the present to the future, from actuality to deferred hope and such remembered consolations as the survival of the mother. Instead of the hearty slapping "May God preserve him", the relatives have to be content with the gentle patting of "May God preserve her father and bring her a brother quickly. God be praised the mother is safe." The mother feels that she has let everybody down by giving them a stone when they wanted bread. The three or four pound notes prepared for distribution to the servants at the rate of one

each remain in the father's or grandfather's pocket—or, maybe, one is brought out and sent quickly to be changed at the shop round the corner for four five shilling notes.

All this happened when Mahmoud's daughter was born, and Sheikh Ahmed, denied his proud grandfatherhood for at least another year, tried to comfort himself with the sentiment—another of the consolatory expressions appropriate to the occasion—he propounded to Mahmoud.

"Whichever it is, it's the gift of God," he said, indicating by his tone that his opinion of God's generosity at that moment was a poor one; and Um Mahmoud added the final encouragement in the traditional repertoire—the encouragement to reason of logical inference: "She who brings forth the girl, can also bring forth the boy."

Mahmoud, left to his own feelings, would not have needed any of this commiseration, but he was unable to resist the mass influence around him. His feelings when he went in to see child and mother were very mixed, and it was all strange and confusing. They had had the English midwife from the hospital, but she had left as soon as her job was done, and the women, who had been kept at bay by her, now swarmed in, taking charge. Their smell filled the room, enveloped the little mite whose eyes had not yet opened, established itself as the atmosphere the newcomer must draw in with her first breath. One of Badriya's sisters lifted the child for Mahmoud to see. The smallness, the utterly passive smallness and lightness of the sausage-parcel—lifted, displaced, put down again, fragile and helpless beyond anything he had ever seen—drew out of him a compassion he had never known. But even in it there was a repugnance at the rawness of the little blob of a face, creased and congested in the potentiality of shape. As he looked at it, the child began to cry. The tiny mouth opened. A long paroxysm of crying held it jammed open, and the visible gums quivered in blind anguish. Mahmoud turned away and went to see his wife.

"A girl is nicer than a boy," he said. "I am not a bit disappointed." And he patted her hand with a reluctant tenderness. Her face was tired, but relaxed in a placid contentment.

The placid contentment deepened and broadened in the weeks following her delivery. For forty days, as the matriarchy prescribed, she remained in bed and drank pints of melted butter, supposed to stimulate the lactic glands. The sight of these cups of liquid fat became as abhorrent to him as the smell of the grease scent. And when she finally got up, he was

staggered by the difference in her looks; the graceful loveliness had gone.

Something else staggered him too: the discovery that his feelings for her had been so dependent on her looks. . . . Or had her personality, too, coarsened—lost that childish charm which had always appealed to him despite her mental inadequacies, which had given at moments an irresistible attraction to those very inadequacies?

He was glad that the pregnancy and the confinement were at last over. He was now rid of the embarrassment they had caused him in relation to Jean Bannerman and whenever she had asked him about Badriya during that time. Now she asked him about the child, but he didn't mind that. He felt no indelicacy in his fatherhood once the child had an existence of its own and Badriya's body ceased to be involved. He even liked talking to her about the child.

Many Mondays and Fridays had come and gone since the day he told her about the circumstances of his marriage, without her feeling again the disturbing intimacy of that evening. The lessons had continued normally, giving her, and, as she could well see, him, great pleasure; but without flashing any more signals to warn her that the pleasure was anything more than that of a very agreeable friendship.

But one evening, when his daughter was about six weeks old, she saw that red signal again. She was asking him about the child—Leila they had called her—and he began telling her of his plans for her upbringing; of all the things he was going to do to make sure that she grew up into the kind of girl he wanted her to be. He was going to have an English governess for her as soon as she was two or three years old. Later he would send her to a boarding-school abroad—a school like that he went to. In her summer holidays he would take her on trips to Europe . . . to England.

"You haven't entered her at Oxford already, have you?" she asked, laughing at the thoroughness of his programme.

He laughed back, then became serious again.

"If she were a boy I shouldn't worry so much in advance. Our boys have a reasonable chance without English governesses or going abroad. But you've got to do all this for a girl if you want to save her from our environment, and I am determined to save my daughter. . . . I've lost one battle, but I'm not going to lose the other." The look he gave her seemed, in its bitter defeat and hopelessness, to skip the bright implications of his last sentence and to be focused on the confession that came before it. She felt that in-

imate tenseness again and wanted to break it, but he looked so unhappy, so longing for the comfort of her sympathy, that she knew it would be unkind of her to skate away from the subject. At last she said:

"Don't say that, Mahmoud. She is still very young. You must give her time."

"Miss Bannerman," he said, "you have taught her . . . and you've given it up. I have tried, and I have had to give it up."

"But book learning isn't everything. She is bound to develop in your company. Of course, she'll never be anywhere near you intellectually; but that's not necessary at all. Many of the blindest men in England are happily married to unintellectual women. . . . Don't you think you are exaggerating the importance of brains and learning in a wife?"

"It isn't brains and learning that I want. I should be quite happy if only she would cease to be a harem girl; but she can't. It's in her blood. It's the only life she knows here. That's why I want Leila to know a different life from the very beginning. Some fortunate countryman of mine will then find in her the kind of wife he wants when the time comes."

"You're beginning to be very fond of Leila," she said, finding safety in this new aspect of his married life at least.

"Yes. I'd no idea the day she was born that I should get attached to her so quickly. I thought fathers didn't begin to take much interest in their children till they could speak. But she's very sweet already; she's beginning to smile."

She continued to feel uneasy after he had gone, though when she tried to remember everything he had said she could not find even an innuendo to justify her particular fear. He had not said a single word to indicate any feelings for her which she would not want him to have. But she did not like his telling her—or as good as telling her—that he had written his wife off. The mere condition he was in now made her feel nervous, that and the fact that he had chosen to tell her of it, and the way he looked at her when he said it.

She was glad it would soon be time for her to go on leave. That would bring the lessons to an end for the time being. He wouldn't see her for three months. He would become more and more interested in his daughter. Perhaps the child would make a new link between him and his wife.

The following Sunday, Amin and Betty invited Mahmoud and Badriya to the cinema. Badriya liked the pictures, and the cinema

was one of the few places she went to with him. Even some of her completely secluded countrywomen were beginning to go to the cinema. They came fully swathed a little before the crowd began to pour in. They sat in the remote wing boxes, and only uncovered their faces when the lights went out.

At the cinema even English company did not make demands on Badriya. She sat at one with everybody in the general silence. She survived the interval without too much discomfort, looking round at the people in the other boxes and the posters advertising coming films pasted round the walls.

The interval lights were very bright so that everybody in the whole open-air auditorium became visible, and that night as Badriya looked round she saw Jean Bannerman with a party of men and women in another box not far from them.

"There's Miss Bannerman," she said, waving back to her.

Mahmoud looked, and there were more wavings between the two boxes. In Jean's box, she and two nurses were sitting in the front row, and three of the college tutors sat behind them in white shirts and black ties and cummerbunds. A tray of drinks arrived in the box at that moment, and there was a bustle and a shuffle while the men arranged the drinks on a wicker table in the middle. The tutor behind Jean passed her her glass and then offered her the plate of peanuts that always came with the drinks, and just before the lights went out again Mahmoud saw them exchange a gay laugh over something the man had said.

He became miserable and could not fix his mind on the film. Somehow, until that moment he had never thought of her private life, never thought of her except in relation to himself, as though she existed only during those two hours a week when he sat with her. In those two hours the world consisted only of them and he was so near to her. But now how far from her in that box—he in his black skin, married to Badriya; she with her own countrymen, in a moment of that large life stretching behind her and before her, in which he had no share, of which he knew nothing—the life in which one day she would love and marry a man of her race, if she wasn't already in love. . . . His eyes strayed to Betty and Amin sitting beside him, to the miracle which had already happened once, which a year before he could not have imagined.

Something funny happened in the film which he wasn't following, and the laugh which went up around him brought him sharply back to himself.

When they were going out they mingled with Jean and her group at the gate. He walked beside her for a moment exchanging

remarks on the film, recovering rapidly from his earlier gloom when she said:

"Oh, I'm glad I've seen you. I wanted to tell you that I shouldn't be able to have my lesson tomorrow."

"Oh," he said. Then, "Would you like to have it on Tuesday instead. I could manage that."

"You slave driver!" she said. "No, I think you'd better let me off this one; and no double time on Friday, either!"

Her pleasantries consoled him, but when they parted his dis-appointment came back, bitter beyond reason, bitter with an absurd, suspicious jealousy and with anger. . . . What was she doing on Monday? It obviously wasn't work or she would have said so, and why couldn't she have had it on Tuesday, instead . . . or Wednesday? Why cancel it altogether and keep him waiting nearly a whole week to see her again?

When they got home his daughter was crying wildly and her nanny, carrying her against her shoulder, was walking with her up and down the verandah, patting her on the back in vain attempts to appease her. Mahmoud, hearing the piteous yelling the moment he got out of the car, ran up the steps ahead of his wife and took the child from the nanny. Immediately she stopped crying, and he was delighted. Her eyes, round and black in the soft brown face, rested on his in sudden, relaxed contentment, still holding a few tears at the corners.

"Leila, Leila," he said, soothing her and wiping the tears away. Then he began flicking her lower lip gently with his forefinger, and she smiled, squirming with delight.

"That's better," he said, "that's better. Smile again, smile again." And every time his finger touched her lip she gave another happy gurgle.

"She wants her feed," said Badriya, taking her away from him.

Amin and Betty had come with them for dinner before going back to their bungalow. The three of them sat alone as Badriya went in to attend to the child.

"How's Jean Bannerman getting on with her Arabic lessons?" asked Betty.

"Very well," he said.

"Pity she'll have to drop them for three months. She'll be going on leave quite soon now, won't she?"

"In another six weeks," he said, realising with a sudden sharpness how soon he would stop seeing her altogether for endless, endless months.

At times he toyed with the idea of going to England himself.



He could do it easily, go by himself, say he wanted to do some research work at Oxford. His father would give him the money he needed. He could arrange to travel on the same ship as Jean Bannerman both ways—that meant a whole month with her, and in England he could manage to see something of her in various ways. But the temerity of the idea frightened him. He dreaded giving himself away, her guessing his reasons, his feelings. If once she knew, if he went too far, he might lose her altogether. And on the ship there would be so many English people, from the country, from India, and he would be out of place. In such a company she might not like him to come too close to her.

The day for the last lesson came. It was a Friday, and she was due to leave the following Tuesday. There would be no lesson on the Monday because she would be too busy with other things. The school had closed down for the summer, and the buildings around her house already wore the deserted look of the holidays. The heat poured out of the open furnaces of June with great ferocity, and the scorched mud walls of the sandy street looked to him an unbearable preview of desolation as he pulled up his car at the gate.

But he entered with a jaunty step, determined to fill this last hour with gaiety, to amuse her, to send her away with happy memories of him—and afraid that if he didn't arm himself with this shield of mirth she would see too much of what he wished to hide behind it.

"One more hour," he said, "and you'll be out of the clutches of Sibawayh." Sibawayh was the doyen of the Arabic grammarians, the high priest of syntax, the oracle of the sheikhs, over whose tyrannies the two of them had had many a laugh together. "I'm afraid Sibawayh wouldn't pass this one," he would say to some peculiar construction in her exercises, or, "Personally I don't mind a bit, but we must think of Sibawayh," and she would grumble, "Oh, drat the old stickler!"

"I shall miss the old martinet," she said. "I've been getting quite fond of him." Then she added, "No doubt he owes it to his very kind and patient interpreter."

"I don't think I've been strict enough with you," he said. "We shall have to take things much more seriously when you come back."

They had their lesson sitting out on the lawn. It went with a gay, lively swing, interspersed with much laughter. The heaviness in his heart came out strangely in this flow of nervous, fragile gaiety.

When her face was bent down on the book, he gazed at it with a quiet ache of sadness, catching the simple curves of her cheek and hair in his mind so that he should continue to see them just like that when she had gone. But the moment he looked up, his vivacity returned and they pitched happily along till the end of the lesson.

"You must have a drink before you go," she said, and he stayed.

"Here's to your leave," he said.

"And to yours."

"Oh, mine isn't going to be very exciting. Leave is dull for those who stay behind. It's wonderful for you . . . travelling, going home, seeing your people and old friends. But for us, what is it? Just summer dullness—no work."

"No Sibawayh!"

"That's not work . . . that's a great pleasure." His fear of giving himself away was battling against a rush of emotion as the last few moments were slipping by, against a desperate desire to let the fringe of his feelings touch her for a second before he rose to go. He looked at her with a bright, sad steadiness as he said that. A significant, silent moment passed while he held her eyes—a moment during which her fear too, and her caution, succumbed in her look. Then she dropped her eyes, and when she looked up again she said, breaking the spell with a laugh:

"I'm sure you'll be glad to have a rest, all the same." And to deny him the opportunity for a denial which might bring back the tension, added light-heartedly, "And so shall I."

He said, "But three months is a long time, you know. If you drop it completely, you'll forget it all."

"I shall take the books with me and look at them from time to time."

"You must practise writing . . . write me a few letters in Arabic. Sibawayh and I will correct and return them to you. Really. You could write simple letters in Arabic now." His speech had covered its surface note of banter, but she felt the eagerness, almost supplication beneath it.

"Oh no, I couldn't," she said. "You overrate your pupil."

"Nonsense! Couldn't you say, 'I am very happy in England. The sun is always shining. It hasn't rained a single time. Give my greetings to the old country'! Of course you could. . . . Please do it."

She was still laughing over the jocularity of his sample sentences when he paused and uttered the entreaty at the end. The passionate begging in it quavered under its veil of pleasantry, and

despite all her misgivings, she said on an answering impulse:

"All right . . . I will try."

When he rose, she held out her hand, saying, "Well, good-bye."

"Oh no," he said. "I shall see you at the station."

"Please don't trouble, if it's only for me."

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "There may be others on the train." And he went to the car.

She wanted to shout after him, "Give my love to Badriya," but the words would not come out.

At the station on Tuesday she did not see him. The train was due to leave at 10 a.m. and there was the usual gathering in the station enclosure, at least four or five seers-off to every passenger, the little helmeted groups chatting at each window, the steady incursion of Government officials taking half an hour off from their offices for a foretaste of the pleasure that would soon be theirs—the incomparable annual thrill of waving not to those who were leaving but to the poor devils left behind standing in the blistering heat, going back to their dreary offices, while the cream-coloured train slid out of the station going north—north to the Mediterranean, to Europe, to England; north for ninety days of which this was the first glorious moment pregnant with the promise of all those to come!

A few English friends saw Jean Bannerman off—the assistant director of education, two of the college tutors, the district commissioner and his wife and the hospital matron. Until the last moment she expected Mahmoud to come, her eyes searching the enclosure, looking towards the gate, hoping suddenly to see his tall figure hurrying through. The first whistle blew and she had to get on the train, but there were still five minutes, and she stood in her compartment looking out of the window, her English friends chatting to her from below. She was surprised to find how hurt she felt at the thought of his not coming, though she had told him not to come and though she ought to be glad to see that his feelings were not as near the danger-line as she sometimes thought they were. Only when the second whistle went and the train began to move, wafted by the general waving of arms, she knew that he was not coming.

She remained at the window for a moment, seeing the station disappear round the bend, then as the dust began to rise from the gathering speed she pulled up the sash of dark glass and began to settle herself down for the long journey, rearranging the smaller pieces of her luggage. The college tutors had bought her one or two detective novels and a few magazines. She took her reading

glasses out of her bag to look at them. The sleeping-car attendant came round to ask her if she would like a drink.

In a few moments the train went over the bridge and stopped at the first station, which was only a few miles from the town, leaving a large suburb on the other side of the river. She was just beginning to pick up interest in a new enterprise of Hercule Poirot's, when a tall shadow loomed up behind the frosted glass of her door and knocked.

"Come in," she said, expecting the attendant with the lemon squash she had ordered.

The door opened and Mahmoud stepped in.

"You!" she said. "You really shouldn't have troubled to come all this way." She thought he had arrived at the main station too late and raced the train to the suburb stop.

"I didn't go to the main station," he said in some confusion. "I went to the town to bring you a little refreshment for the journey, and took a short-cut here."

She took from him the bouquet of flowers and the basket of oranges and mangoes, guessing at once that he had avoided the main station in order to be alone with her when he said good-bye.

"Is everything all right?" he asked. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, touched and perturbed at once by his gesture, so that her looks and speech wavered painfully between warmth and reserve. Fearing that the tone of her last answer might have sounded too dry, she added, "And you've turned comfort into luxury with your very kind gift."

"You'd better give these to the attendant to keep on the ice for you."

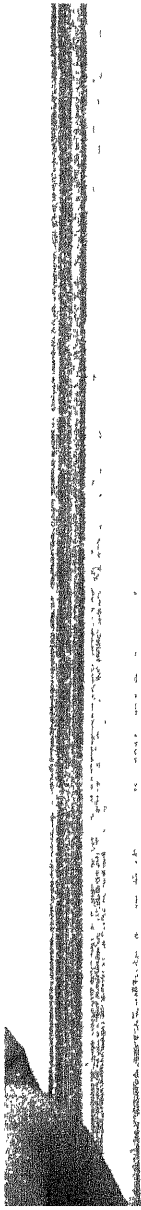
They stood facing each other, he in the doorway, she just inside the compartment, under the hum of the electric fan; breaking the tension they both felt—the tension that began to grow instantly if they ceased to speak—with trivial remarks about the weather and the journey. Then they heard the distant whistle of the engine, long and melancholy through the sandy waste outside.

"You must go," she said. "The train is leaving."

"Yes; it only stops three minutes here," he said. "One minute for each month of your absence." The smile in his eyes was like a feeble ripple on a bottomless pool of sadness.

"Good-bye . . . and thank you very very much for everything." She held out her hand, and in her eyes there was a strange, abnormal brightness.

"Good-bye," he said, steadying the tremor in his voice. He pressed her hand, holding it silently for an instant, mustering his



courage to say what he had been rehearsing at this moment. It wasn't much. And it was too much for him:

"It's going to be very dull without you." She dared to say, and to cover up the charge of emotion already prepared the sequel, an immediate switch of vein, so he added, smiling, "... without Sibaway."

The jerk they felt then snapped the moment from having to say anything in answer.

"Quick," she said. "The train is moving!"

"Good-bye," he repeated, and she watched him go down the corridor and turn to wave before he stepped out.

Then she shut the door of her compartment and went to the bed. The pile of magazines and detective novels on the table but for a long time she did not look at them. She had brought her the lemon-squash, but when he gave her the book to sign she took it absentmindedly and he was gone for a few moments before she realised what he was doing. She saw him still standing there in respectful waiting.

In the turmoil of her feelings, against every fear, one sweet affirmation swept on again and again, and she was glad he had come, after all; that an emptiness remained in her heart if she had not seen him. The emptiness now more richly filled because of his coming, because she had seen him alone, because he had said.

And when all that filled her with fear too, she talked the fear away, accusing it of absurdity. There was nothing to be afraid of in a relationship so far removed from the circumstances, with such obviously rigid formalities. A relationship which could never be anything but a friendship—precious to him because he needed a woman and could not have it at home, and precious to her because it made her happy to fill such a want in him, his inner loneliness, to help him achieve the work he wanted to achieve in his country . . . and because she was not so aware of this, she was already twenty-six when the first time she had found herself receiving such a man. Only once before, when she was eighteen, she had been so fond of her. He had been killed in an air raid.

As she got out of the train twenty-four hours later on a river steamer, a young native in a police officer's uniform came to her and said:

"Excuse me, are you Miss Bannerman?"

"Yes."

"I've had a telegram from my friend, Mahmoud Suleiman, asking me to look after you. Is this your luggage? . . . Here, porter! Just let me have your passport, Miss Bannerman, and then you can go straight on to the steamer. I'll get it stamped and follow you with the luggage."

When her luggage came on board it had grown by the accretion of a small crate of bananas, the police officer having interpreted Mahmoud's request with customary Arab amplification, and deemed it necessary to add this present to his other services.

"This is too kind," she protested; "really you shouldn't . . ."

"It is nothing," he apologised. "I am ashamed to ask you to accept it, but it's the only fruit one can find here." And he carried it inside the cabin himself. "Is everything all right?" he asked her when he came out. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"Could you post a letter for me if I wrote it in two minutes?" she said on a quick impulse. "I want to thank your friend, Mahmoud, and tell him how kind you have been."

"Of course. I shall be on the boat for some time. You needn't hurry."

She went into the writing saloon eagerly, glad that she had thought of doing it, glad to think that the day after Mahmoud would be reading her letter, so much sooner than he expected to hear from her—not an exercise in Arabic but a letter in English to tell him adequately how moved she was by this last kindness of his.

She wrote:

MY DEAR MAHMOUD,

I was moved more than I can tell you when your friend the police officer (I didn't quite catch his name) met me here and told me about your telegram to him. It didn't seem possible when we said good-bye yesterday that you had left any parting kindness undone. But how wrong I was!

I stepped out of the train a mere nobody, and a moment later I was being treated like the Governor-General's wife—all thanks to your very kind thought and the kindness of your noble deputy, who added bananas to your oranges and delicious mangoes, and has promised to post this letter for me.

With many, many thanks and every good wish to you all for the summer.

P.S.—I hope you'll not be disappointed that I couldn't express all the above in Arabic!

The moment she finished writing, her decision to send the letter wavered. Her very eagerness to write and post it alarmed her, and the thought that he might sense that eagerness when he received it, still more. It occurred to her that his sending that telegram was a gesture that overstated ordinary friendship and should not be encouraged. . . . Yet she could not bear to let the kindness, the warmth in it, go unacknowledged. She read the letter again with a censor's eye, but saw nothing objectionable in it. It seemed to her to strike exactly the right note, warm and light at once: it pleased her. Quickly she sealed and addressed it and, coming out on deck, gave it to the police officer.

## CHAPTER XII

For many months he had kept the nail-file Jean Bannerman gave him on his dressing-table, using it religiously every morning and with special care on the days of the Arabic lessons.

The day after she left he went to his dressing-table in the morning, intending to take the file and keep it in his pocket. It wasn't there. He looked for it behind his brushes. He lifted every article on the table. He opened the drawer, thinking it might have slipped into it. But he couldn't find it. Then he began to search on the floor.

"What are you looking for?" asked Badriya, coming into the room carrying Leila.

"For my nail-file. Have you seen it?"

"Yes. I took it away yesterday."

"Where did you put it?"

She thought for a moment. "I can't remember . . . I'll find it for you later."

"Oh, why did you take it away? I don't like things removed from where I keep them." He was irritated and snappy.

"One would think you really needed it. Don't you clip your nails enough with your teeth?"

"I do need it. I use it every morning."

"All right. Take the girl. I'll go and look for it."

He took the child from her, and she went out of the room. Leila stretched her little body and screwed her head in a smiling ecstasy, and his annoyance was checked immediately. He sat down and fondled her on his knee, and she gurgled happily. She was now three months old, and her shape was an assortment of delicious

curves and dimples. Her cheeks curved and dimpled, and her shoulders and arms and bent knees; rings of lovely brown fatness squeezed round her wrists; ripples of it crowded above her knees, and her toes were like little drops pressed out of the fatness of her feet.

"Oh, you disgraceful little barrel of fat! Oh, you Don de Michelin of babies!" he said to her, feeling all those circles and endearingly round his heart as she stopped smiling and looked at him with a sort of hush solemnity from the still, black circles of her eyes.

Badriya came back saying, "I couldn't find it. It will be found later."

"I wish you'd leave my things alone," he snapped out.

"What's all this fuss about a nail-file for?" she said. "It'll only cost you sixpence to get a new one when you go out this morning . . . or was that one so precious because the Englishwoman gave it to you?"

"Don't talk nonsense. . . . It's not your business why I want it." He dressed in silence and left immediately after for the farm, where he had planned to stay the night at the rest-house as he had been doing frequently of late.

In spite of the appalling heat, he spent most of the morning on his feet in the fields. The misery in him was like a rage that could only be stilled by physical exhaustion—by a merciless flagellation of the body that harboured it. And as it was Ramadan, he would not allow anyone to accompany him, but walked alone, inventing reasons to take him here and there—along the canal, to the huts in the village, across the fields where the tractors were kept.

He himself was not fasting, but everybody else at the farm, men and women, had not eaten or drunk since dawn—since, as the Prophet enjoined, it was possible to distinguish the threads of light and of darkness in the sky—and would not take food or water again until the boom of the breakfast gun told them that the sun had set. Already at midday the faces of the workers looked pinched with the strain, even the faces of Ibrahim and the clerks sitting in the shade of the offices, but many were out in the sun and using the muscles which only a thirsty, drying blood visited. Mahmoud could see their naked backs glistening with the precious moisture they were losing every minute without hope of replacement till the evening. When he passed close to them, he saw the desiccated saliva caking like brine at the corners of their mouths. He himself had had a glass of water only an hour ago, and already his throat was screaming for gallons of it and he was counting the minutes



it would take him to get back to the rest-house and reach for a bottle from the refrigerator. Occasionally he passed a man bathing in the canal or rinsing his mouth with a handful of water and spitting it out. This was a mild indulgence allowed them *in extremis*.

At the rest-house the table was laid for his lunch and the servant Yusef, himself fasting, was waiting to serve it. Mahmoud went straight to the refrigerator and took out a bottle misting with coldness. The one demand of his life in that instant was in his dry throat crying for the water in that bottle.

A sudden caprice of will seized him—a challenge greater than his thirst. He recorked the bottle without drinking and put it back.

"Shall I bring lunch now?" asked Yusef, coming into the room.

"I don't want any lunch," said Mahmoud, "I'm fasting."

The sense of inferiority he had felt towards the servants at meal-times since the fast started left him, and he could now speak to Yusef on a footing of equality.

"Ramadan is gracious!" said Yusef, giving him the greeting of the fast with a smile of glad fellowship. "I didn't know you were fasting. Ibrahim Effendi told us to prepare lunch for you."

"I've changed my mind," said Mahmoud. "Take what you have prepared for lunch to Ibrahim Effendi's and tell him to expect me at sunset. I'll break my fast with him."

Exhausted with his walking, dizzy with his hunger and thirst, he went into the bedroom and lay down, gratified by his decision, by the exhaustion, by the dizziness, by the prospect of another four or five hours of bodily denial, and by the feeling that he was now in communion with Yusef and Ibrahim and all the others, even though his reasons for fasting were not theirs.

When he walked across to Ibrahim's house the sun was only a few feet above the horizon and the breakfasts were being laid out. On the back verandah of the rest-house Yusef's wife was arranging her bowls of refreshment on the floor ready for the gun—the dates and the millet flakes soaked in water, and other cool brews with which the fast was always broken some little while before the cooked food was taken. Similar bowls with similar contents—sometimes four or five, sometimes only one or two—could be seen on palm mats outside the village huts. As soon as the gun boomed, but not with any unseemly haste—for it was a mark of fortitude cultivated by many to show that you could outstay the prescribed course by a few moments—every household would squat round its

collection of bowls, taking turns at a few gulps from each.

"Ramadan is gracious," said Mahinoud to a group of men outside one of the huts, moved by the modesty of their coming breakfast, by the gaudiness in those few bowls and the one basin of cooked food that would follow it—the spiced soup of dried meat and vegetables poured down the hole in the middle of the layers of thin soft bread stacked up like napkins.

"God be gracious to you," they answered.

Ibrahim had his breakfast spread out on a little patch of grass overlooking the river. The bowls covered with conic hats of coloured straw stood on a low table, and a few chairs were placed around it on the rug. Two of the clerks from the office joined them, and the four sat waiting for the gun. They were all weary, but they talked and laughed so as not to betray their impatience.

When the gun went, a boatman, having delivered his last cargo of the day on the opposite bank, had started rowing his ferry back across the several hundred yards of water to its berth close to where they were sitting. Mahmoud saw him, still a good distance from his destination, alone in the large boat, rowing patiently. He took no notice of the gun. The oars dipped in and out, and slowly the boat cut through the dusky, glassy water. At last it reached their bank and ran on to the sand. The boatman dropped his oars; then with quiet movements, with a simple sublimity that held Mahmoud's eyes in reverence, he dipped his cupped hand into the river and drank twice, after which he took out a few dates from his pocket and ate them. Then having breakfasted, he got out, moored his boat and walked away.

The next day Mahmoud fasted from dawn like all the others. Yusef woke him up when the gun for the dawn breakfast went and he had tea and fruit long before there was any light in the sky. . . . Jean was now on the river steamer. It was two days since she had left. For another two days, until she reached the Mediterranean port from which she was to sail, he would be able to follow her journey stage by stage. He knew the time-table of that journey so well, knew at what time she had left the train for the steamer, at what time she would leave the steamer for the next railway stretch. He could see her having her meals in the dining-car, sitting on deck, going through the customs, being pestered by the sellers of phoney antiques. . . . But after that he would lose sight of her.

The consciousness of her absence was like a great, aching vacuum inside him. He could not fill it with anything else. But he

found it soothing to set up beside it the physical vacuum resulting from the fast, soothing to hurt his body, to deaden his feelings. The one vacuum somehow swallowed up the other.

He still pretended to himself that she was only a friend. Such friendships often existed between men and women when any other relationship was impossible—romantic, devoted friendships. . . . Yes, why not? Why should he not feel all that for her, pine in her absence, long for her return? Only, only he must be careful not to frighten her. He must be careful when he wrote not to make her feel that there was anything dangerous in this friendship. He wanted to say so much, he wanted to write so often, every day! But he mustn't. And he mustn't be unkind to his wife. He regretted having made such a fuss over that nail-file. He would be nice to her when he went home that evening. He would take her some magazines and a bottle of scent.

Some time after he arrived, Badriya said casually:

"There's a letter for you. It came this afternoon."

"Where is it?" A wild hope, which he had scarcely dared to entertain, leapt up in him.

"The boy put it somewhere."

"Where did he put it?" He was already on his feet, looking round the room.

"With the papers on that table, I think."

He turned to the table and saw the corner of an envelope sticking out from under a book. Only one word of the address was visible, but it told him what he wanted to know. He opened it with a show of indifference, glanced rapidly at it, then pushed it into his pocket. As he hoped, she did not have the curiosity to ask who it was from. He remained with her for a moment, then went into his work-room and reread it.

He reread it five or six times, then immediately sat down and wrote her a long letter. From caution he had not intended to write until she had been away a week, but all prudence was swept away by the sweet and thrilling encouragement of those few words she had scribbled him in haste on the river steamer. His pen flowed, he filled sheet after sheet, writing with a wonderful exhilaration, with brilliance, but also with conscious cunning, turning every sentiment into a jest the moment it had been put down so that it should sound harmless—his sense of the emptiness she had left behind her, his inability to pass by the school enclosure, his hating the thought of the coming Mondays and Fridays, his missing of Sibawayh as no grammarian had been missed before in all the annals of learning. He wrote, expressing his truest feelings but in

a style that looked like humorous exaggeration; and he did not know whether he hoped or feared that she would see through it. A phrase from *In Memoriam* kept running through his head as he wrote—"half reveal and half conceal the soul within".

He told her of the fasting and of the satisfaction it was giving him as a self-imposed discipline. . . . "I do not think I should have got anything like the same kick out of it if I had been a believer . . . and you know, I have discovered the real meaning of fasting for the masses. Our theologians say that it was ordained to humble the rich and make them feel with the poor, but I think its real purpose is to give to the poor the illusion of wealth! One gulp of water and a handful of dry dates at sunset become a more sumptuous feast than Belshazzar's when you've had nothing to eat or drink since dawn. No matter how unhappy you are from other causes, thirst and hunger will fill you as the day advances with the one happy thought that certain gratification will come at sunset, and you will live for that if for nothing else. What a psychologist our Prophet must have been!"

As he was sealing the envelope, Badriya came in carrying the nail-file.

"I have found it," she said. "I had put it in with my sewing things."

He took it, saying, "Oh, it wasn't really important. I'm sorry I sounded so angry about it yesterday."

Then he went out and posted the letter. He was not certain that he was going to post it until it slipped down the slot. At the irrevocableness of the action, a wave of alarm swept him from one side and one of joy from the other.

Ramadan dragged by in the fierce heat, the guns boomed at dawn and sunset. Rich and poor, masters and servants, waited each day for the setting of the sun, dragged themselves with more effort as the afternoon advanced, strained more and more to part their caking sticky lips in the smiles of fortitude. Empty bellies waited for food, giddy heads for the first smoke of the day, and everybody for water. In the evening life returned; festive, communal life, gay gatherings, breakfasts in each other's houses—the long, gracious evenings of Ramadan.

Like the others, Mahmoud waited each day for the evening. Even if no reply came from Jean, drink and food would come in the evening. He wrote again a week later, and again ten days after that. But still no reply came, nothing but a stony silence after that first precious message from the river steamer.

The summer was over. Her leave was over. She was coming

back. But she had not written to him. He knew from the Education Department what train she would be arriving on, but he dared not meet her. He knew why she had not written. He knew that he had risked and lost her friendship. He knew the Arabic lessons would be at an end. And in the bitterness of his misery and hopelessness, he knew at last the masked truth in his own heart. He could no longer pretend, no longer stretch the meaning of words to disguise his feelings or circumvent his conscience. He loved Jean Bannerman, loved her desperately and passionately, as men loved women, with all his heart and mind and body. For months he had loved her in this way, and from fear and hopelessness had gone on playing verbal tricks on himself, dreading to face the truth, dreading, above all, to let her see it. And yet, underneath, knowing it himself and wanting her to know it, driven by a sweetness of desire stronger than fear, by a hope greater than hopelessness, driven until he overstepped the mark in his letters and courted this negative answer.

What other answer could he have expected?

He did not meet her. He would stay away from her. She would understand why, just as he understood why she had not written.

Explanations were unnecessary, and perhaps it was just as well that things had happened this way. Recognising frankly what their friendship had become for him, he saw the futility, the madness, of its continuing on that fictitious basis. And he could not, except in fleeting moments whose hope shivered into pieces almost as soon as it was formed, see the fiction ended in fulfilment. Mountains stood in the way in every direction: his marriage, his child, his father, the power of the family, his race, his skin; her own decency and delicacy of feeling which, even if she had no other aversion, even if he could bring himself to divorce his wife, would hold her back from coming to him over so much wreckage. In his position, how could he open his mouth to her, tell her that he loved her, ask her for anything? Had she not answered even his masked, distant intimations with her silence? It was better so, and rather now than later. He would devote himself to his work, to his daughter, and if he could not love Badriya in the same way, if she could never be the wife he wanted, at least she made few demands on him, and he pitied her.

In the midst of his misery a new thought occurred to him, which instantly rolled back all this tide of argument as though it had been a strip of oilcloth. It occurred to him that she might have written him a letter which had gone astray, which had come like

her first letter while he was away at the farm, and somehow got lost. All his interpretations of her silence might be wrong. She might have found nothing alarming in his letters, might be wanting to resume the Arabic lessons, their friendship as it had been-- everything, and would be waiting for him to call or ring her up, perhaps hurt that he had not met her train! Oh, why, why had he not met it?

He went to her house immediately after breakfast the next morning, when she was most likely to be alone.

"Is Miss Bannerman busy? Is anyone with her?" he asked the servant, meeting him on the verandah. Then his heart leapt at the sudden sound of her voice from the room.

"Hallo!" she said, standing at the window. "Come in. I've just finished my breakfast." She was smiling. She was not displeased to see him. She was wearing a plain peach-coloured frock. Her face, framed in the simple archway of her hair sloping smoothly to her ears, was sweeter than ever, refreshed by the gentler air of England, unbearably sweet in that first vision after three months.

Controlling his excitement as best he could, but afraid that she would notice the iciness of his hand, he walked in, saying lightly heartedly:

"Hallo! How are you? I hope I haven't come too early."

"Oh no. It's nice to see you again."

She put out her hand with a warm gesture, apparently as light-hearted and unembarrassed as he was trying to seem. . . . If she said nothing, should he ignore the letters, not ask whether she had written, just drop a curtain and assume that nothing had happened?

"How's everybody at home?" she asked. "How's Leila?"

"Oh, she's a most disgraceful and lovely collection of balloons and balloon tyres--cheeks, legs, arms and tummy."

He heard her laugh again, and thrilled at his ability to make her laugh, though he sensed an uneasiness behind her laughter, noticing the abruptness with which the sound ended.

"And Badriya? And your father and mother?"

"They're all well, thank you."

He asked her about her leave and England and the journey. She asked him about the farm and the huts and the adult classes and the Shendis. Then they both became silent, as though mutually recognising at last that these things were not really what they wanted to talk about. In a few seconds the silence was quivering with its charge, and he was just thinking of saying "What's hap-

pened to your Arabic?"—opening the real subject with a smile and a light remark, when she said with an earnest, pained look:

"I do hope you didn't think it very rude of me not to reply to your letters. . . . I want you to know it wasn't that."

So she hadn't written at all. There had been no lost letter. And now he knew for certain why she hadn't written, knew that all pretence was at an end, and, knowing it, was suddenly glad, extraordinarily eased. She was looking at him with pain, with a tense, muffled warmth. She was unhappy, not angry or cold. He said humbly:

"Only tell me that you weren't angry, that my letters didn't displease you. That's all I want to know. I don't mind your not replying."

"Of course I'm not angry. Your letters were very sweet. Too sweet. You mustn't write to me like that. You mustn't feel like that about me, Mahmoud."

"I never knew what it was to feel like that about anybody until you went away. I couldn't help writing to you, any more than I could help breathing." He was reckless now, borne on by a sweet, mad desperation.

"Please, please don't. You mustn't say that. . . . Not if you want our friendship to continue. Don't you see how impossible you are making it?"

"I love you." For a moment they looked vacantly into each other's eyes, then she said quietly:

"Please go." She had turned very white and impassive.

"I've no right to ask you for anything, not even if you care for me. Everything is against me. I am married. I have a child. My country is backward and my skin is different from yours."

"Oh, it's nothing to do with that! But please don't go on . . . you don't know what you're saying."

"I know what I am saying, and I'm going to say it all now, because you may not want me to see you again. . . . If I were an Englishman all I should care to know would be if you were fond of me."

"You know very well I am fond of you, Mahmoud. You're a very dear friend, but anything else is unthinkable. Don't you see?"

"Only because I am already married? You know my wife means absolutely nothing to me. You know I didn't choose her. . . . You know her! What have I in common with her? How can it be wrong of me to love you?"

"But I don't love you, Mahmoud . . . not in that way." She saw the bitter pain in his eyes and, knowing what he was thinking,

went on warmly: "Listen to me. It isn't because your skin is dark or your country is backward. It's just that I haven't thought of you, can't think of you in that way because of your circumstances, because of my connection with your family and the way our friendship started. You understand, don't you?"

"Do you love anybody else?"

"No . . . and I don't know any man I like more than you. I mean that. But please don't open this subject again. Forget everything you've said just now. Let's remain just friends. It's been wonderful till now. Don't spoil it. You won't, will you?"

He looked at her numbly for a moment, possessed only by the fact that he had told her. Then he said:

"I'll do anything you wish."

"Unless you would rather we stopped seeing each other. It's up to you."

"No. Never!"

"You're very sweet, Mahmoud."

He went away, feeling extraordinarily happy, amazed at the audacity that had made him tell her that he loved her. The mere thought that she now knew, that she had heard it in so many words from his lips, filled him with a sweet intoxication. Though she had silenced his love, as he would have expected her to, she had not spurned it, she had not been unkind. And for all her injunctions to the contrary, her knowledge of it made a new bond between them.

The woman who is not pleased when a man she likes tells her that he loves her—whatever the circumstances, whatever her inhibitions or her ability or inclination to reciprocate—does not exist. Jean Bannerman was pleased. She had known it at the station when he said good-bye to her, and it had pleased her. She had known it when the police officer met her with his telegram, and it had pleased her. She had known it abundantly from his letters, and though she was frightened and did not reply, it had pleased her. And it pleased her, strangely, excitingly, more than ever, even through the shock and panic of the moment, when she heard him say it openly and simply just now. No man had ever said it to her before. The man she had known at eighteen was killed before he had said it.

She could not attend to anything or sit still for some time after he left. She wandered about the garden, broke off twigs absent-mindedly, plucked leaves and twirled them between her fingers.

The need to command the situation while he was there had



given her lucidity and composure. Now she had none. She was frightened, ashamed of feeling so happy. She ought not to have felt anything but distress at a situation which was going to hurt him and complicate his life, perhaps ruin his last chance of happiness in his marriage—a situation she could not remedy because she would never allow herself to give him what he wanted. It wasn't because he was black or a native. She had told him the truth when she had said it wasn't. Perhaps if she had known him in a different situation, perhaps if he wasn't married . . . But it was quite, quite out of the question. And it was wrong of her to want to keep him as a friend. The wisest thing, the only fair thing to him would have been to insist on a complete break between them.

Every time she came to this conclusion her heart sank. He had become such a part of her life. The weeks would not be the same without the Arabic lessons on Mondays and Fridays . . . and, after all, it was his decision that they should not stop seeing each other. "No. Never!" he had said. Wouldn't it be cruel to deprive him of her friendship? Couldn't she continue to help him with her friendship, even though there must be no thought of anything else? She would try it. She would see how things worked out.

## CHAPTER XIII

THE attack on Mahmoud began some three months later, towards the end of his third term of philosophy lectures. The lectures had been a great success with the small group of third- and fourth-year students who attended them. The whole venture was still something of an experiment outside the official curriculum. The lectures were given in the evenings, and some eight or ten students in all came to them. They were all intelligent and keen—the cream of both the arts and science departments, and to them Mahmoud communicated his passion. Two of them were beginning to think seriously of taking up philosophy as the study of their lives. The library opened a philosophy section on its shelves. Parcels of Plato and Hume, of Bertrand Russell and Whitehead, arrived from England every month. Philosophy discussions went on in the hostel till the small hours of the night. Disputed points were referred to Mahmoud the next morning by groups stopping him in the corridors.

And then the attack began. Whispers, growing louder every week, began to circulate in the strongholds of fanaticism that Mahmoud was teaching atheism at the college.

For some time the attack was muffled, confined to gossip and angry murmurs. In the intelligence reports he received Sir William Carter read: "It is being rumoured in the circles of the religious institute and among the followers of the various sects that Mahmoud, the son of Sheikh Ahmed Suleiman, the Oxford graduate now lecturing at the college, is an atheist, and that his lectures are undermining religious belief among his pupils."

Sir William passed this report to the director of education and the principal of the college. Such accusations against the college were often cropping up. Sometimes they expressed the genuine alarm of the guardians of the faith at any sign of unorthodoxy. Sometimes they were veiled attacks on the Government. And sometimes they were nothing more than a spit of personal venom against some individual teacher. It could also happen that they were a combination of the three things, as Sir William was soon to discover in this case. For a week later he read the following report:

"At a coffee-house in the market-place the other night, Sheikh Tajjedine Samara expressed the opinion that the teaching of atheistic philosophy at the college by Mahmoud Suleiman represented the first step in an organised attempt by the Government to weaken the hold of Islam on the country. The Government, he said, was now sending selected students to British universities, from which they came back stripped of their religious beliefs to spread atheism among the new educated generation. The Government was doing that because it had realised that religious feeling was the greatest force behind nationalism."

Sir William was not unduly shocked by the fantastic ingenuity of this charge. Misrepresentations of the Government were often of this extravagant and tortuous kind. He continued to read:

"This outcry against Mahmoud Suleiman is also being used as a political weapon against his father who is standing in the Assembly elections next month.

"The nationalists are now divided in their attitude to the Assembly. The split began some time ago with the announcement of the names of the twelve members nominated by the Governor-General. The approval with which Osman Mubarak, the editor of *The Voice of the People*, greeted this selection led to his being attacked by Zaki Ismail and his clique, who began to

whisper in their circles that Osman had been bought by the Government, or won over by other means through the influence of Amin Shendi's English wife. It was hinted that the extreme anti-government views professed by this lady on her arrival in the country a year ago had been only a blind, that she was in reality a government agent, and that Sir William Carter was using her to undermine the opposition of people like Osman whom she often invited to her bungalow outside the town. . . . Some of this gossip reached Osman and caused a stormy breach between him and Zaki Ismail, which is the explanation of the increasingly open support he is giving to the Assembly and even to the candidature of Sheikh Ahmed. Now Zaki Ismail and his clique believe that if Sheikh Ahmed's son is branded as an atheist and an active enemy of Islam, his prospects in the election will be damaged beyond repair."

On receiving this second report from Sir William, the principal of the college called Mahmoud in and told him about it.

"Has any of this talk reached you?" he asked.

"No," said Mahmoud.

"I take it," said the principal, smiling, "that you are not preaching open heresy in your lectures?"

"Not directly," said Mahmoud, smiling back. "This is just either ignorant or mischievous talk."

"We must be careful, you know. I'm keen on the lectures going on, and I am not suggesting that we should allow ourselves to be blackmailed by every gust of malicious or stupid misrepresentation. . . . But you will be tactful, won't you?"

"I've said absolutely nothing against religion in my lectures—not a word against Islam. I don't happen to be a believer myself, but that's neither here nor there. I'm lecturing on philosophy, not on my own beliefs and not on religion."

A few days later *The Voice of the People* appeared carrying a leading article under the heading, 'Islam Should Not Fear Knowledge'. After recalling the great days of Moslem philosophy in Spain when Averroes interpreted Aristotle to Europe, and pointing out that philosophy schools had already been established at all universities in the more advanced Moslem countries of the modern age, Osman went on to say: "To oppose the advance of knowledge and prohibit free intellectual enquiry is to render a service not to God but to those who profit from bigotry and obscurantism, and whose motives when examined are often found to contain a greater proportion of personal malice or some oblique

political design than true zeal for the faith. . . . The policy and record of this newspaper are well known. Never have we held a brief for the Government; never shall we accept one, and no consideration of interest or fear shall ever deter us from attacking and exposing official measures detrimental to the interests of the country. But we reserve to ourselves the right to approve what is beneficent, as also to attack and expose evil when it emanates from other quarters than the Government. In this instance, we say to the education department and the college 'Well done!' And we take pride not only in the fact that we have reached the academic level at which philosophy may be taught, but also in the fact that we have now a native of the country who is qualified to teach it."

Mahmoud was perturbed when he read the article. Even after his talk with the principal he had not realised how strong and vicious the campaign against him was. He rang up Osman.

"Did the article please you?" asked Osman.

"I'm most grateful," said Mahmoud, "On behalf of Aflaton and Aristoteles, I thank you. But was it worth while taking so much notice of this silly gossip? . . . Is it as bad as all that?"

"It isn't only you they're after; it's your father and his chances in the election."

"How is it you have come to support my father's candidature?" he asked.

Osman laughed. "Haven't you heard that I have become a government stooge? . . . You're an atheist and I'm a lackey of Sir William Carter's. We're in the same boat."

"But what has it got to do with my father, anyhow?"

"It won't help him to get votes if they fasten this charge on you. . . . You just leave it to me."

Two days later the enemy replied. An article signed by 'Three Zealots for Islam' appeared in a rival newspaper, headed 'Philosophy Should be the Handmaiden of Religion'. The triple author denied with indignation any hostility to philosophy as such, but argued that as the ultimate and absolute truth was given to Moslems in their religion, philosophy could be either true or false, either beneficent or mischievous, according to whether it sought to bring man by the path of human reason to the same eternal truths as those which God had revealed through his Prophet, or not. "Of course," said the triple author, "there have been great philosophers in Islam . . . men who proved that the human intellect is constrained to endorse the great truths of religion, but there have also been false and dangerous philosophers whose sophistries led them away from religion. . . . What alarms us, what should alarm every

true believer, is not that philosophy is being taught in our country, but the danger of its not being taught by the right people. If a teacher of philosophy is not himself a believer, is it not certain that in every comment and every answer he will be sowing doubt and corruption in the minds of his pupils? Let those who come forward to teach philosophy in our midst proclaim their belief in God and the Prophet and their acceptance of the Holy Book, and we shall welcome their teaching with open arms. . . . But unless they do this and formally deny the state of unbelief attributed to them, they must not be surprised if we use our arms to prevent them from poisoning the minds of our youth. And may the time never come in this country when 'progress' becomes a synonym for departure from the truths of Islam."

Sheikh Ahmed was aghast when he saw this article. He carried the paper and went straight to Osman's office.

"God forgive you, Osman," he said. "Have you seen what a poisonous retort your article has drawn? What do we do now?"

"What are you worrying about?" said Osman. "Let Mahmoud give me an interview proclaiming his faith in God and the Prophet, and I'll publish it tomorrow. . . . Then he can go on teaching all the philosophy he wants." He smiled shrewdly at the simplicity of the solution.

"Yes, of course. . . . Of course, he must do that, at once. Ring him up at the college and ask him to come round. . . . May God curse philosophy and the hour it was born! Why did he have to teach philosophy? Is this country ripe for philosophy? . . . Philosophy!" Sheikh Ahmed, forgetting Spinoza, waved his hands in despair. To be branded as an apostate from Islam would be a calamity for his son in his public life . . . and for himself. The election was due in three weeks' time.

Half an hour later Mahmoud joined them. He had seen the article at the college. His father told him what Osman had suggested, adding, "It's the only way. You must give him a categorical denial of this slander to publish tomorrow."

"I will give him a categorical statement that I am not attacking religion nor preaching unbelief in my lectures."

"That wouldn't be enough. You must deny the unbelief attributed to you. Don't you see the point of the article?"

"What has anybody got to do with my personal beliefs? I'm not forcing them down anybody's throat, and I'm not prepared to make any public statements concerning them."

"You're not?"

- "No; I'm not."

"Listen, Mahmoud," said Osman. "If you don't answer this charge, it will stick to you and cause you a lot of trouble in your career. It is impossible for anyone in this country yet to play a part in public life, least of all in education, if he becomes labelled as an unbeliever in Islam. A little formal answer will silence this attack. Don't get obstinate about it."

"Have you really become an infidel, or what?" asked Sheikh Ahmed, who, though he had often jokingly accused his son of infidelity, never thought his attitude had or could become one of radical denial, imagining till that moment that it was merely a matter of superficial lapses from orthodoxy.

"If you mean, do I believe in divine revelation or the sanctity of a given book, the answer is 'no'."

"No? You've never told me that. You've never denied God or the Prophet to me. . . . Didn't you fast Ramadan, like the rest of us?"

"I didn't fast it because I thought God commanded it."

"Very well," said Osman. "You fasted it as a matter of convenient outward conformity. That's all this *démenti* would be. . . . Do it with every mental reservation you wish to enter. . . . Be an unbeliever, but for God's sake don't be a fanatical one!"

"No, I can't do it. . . . I didn't fast as a matter of conformity. It pleased me to fast."

"By God, listen to this imbecile!" said Sheikh Ahmed. "Can't it please you to show a little more sense in this matter? . . . Haven't some of the greatest philosophers believed in God? Who are you to set yourself up against them, let alone the prophets?"

"I have my own ideas about God. . . ."

"Very well then, you believe in God. Why refuse to make a public admission of it? Nobody's asking you for details."

There was a moment's silence, during which Sheikh Ahmed looked at Mahmoud angrily, sadly, beseechingly.

"I'm sorry," said Mahmoud. "I can't do what you're asking me. I don't force my views on anyone; I don't preach them. But when my friends or pupils ask me what I believe, I tell them. I can't do that and then publish denials."

"You'll lose your job at the college," said Sheikh Ahmed.

"I can't help it."

"Do whatever you like then," shouted Sheikh Ahmed. "It isn't your fault; it's my fault for having sent you to Oxford." And he swept out of the room.

Two days later the principal called Mahmoud in again.

"I'm afraid I've got bad news for you," he said. "I've just had a

visit from the fathers of your philosophy pupils . . . at least from three of them, but they also spoke on behalf of the others. They don't wish their sons to attend the lectures."

"I see."

"I'm so sorry this venture has gone sour on us. . . . We could have ignored the gossip, and even the malicious attacks in the Press, but now we have no option."

"Of course."

"Don't despair. Perhaps in a few years' time. . . . Let's thank God He doesn't come into economics at least! You'll have to stick to that for the time being."

Osman offered to write another article hurling denunciation against ignorant parents who let themselves be bullied by mischief-makers into interfering with their sons' education and with the progress of the country. But Mahmoud would not let him. The sudden impact of all that malice and bigotry on his enthusiasm, on his eagerness to work for his people, on his entirely candid and unsuspecting mind, filled him with disgust.

He went home in a sad and bitter mood.

"Why did you make your father angry?" Badriya asked him. "Why don't you write in the paper what he wants you to?" She had heard Sheikh Ahmed telling Um Mahmoud about it, and picked out one or two facts from the torrent of his anger.

He looked at her helplessly, knowing that he couldn't explain to her, that she wouldn't understand why he was unhappy, how he could be sceptical on religion, what it was that prevented him from doing what his father had asked. The issues involved, the feelings he felt, were a thousand miles beyond her horizon.

It was only to Jean Bannerman he could go with his troubles. The next day was a Friday and he would be seeing her in the evening. More than three months had passed since he had told her that he loved her and she had forbidden him to mention it again. Outwardly he obeyed her, and their relations were as though that tremendous disclosure had not taken place. The Arabic lessons were resumed, the humorous battling with the riddles of Sibawayh, the intimate talks—intimate as between friends. . . . But who had ever laid down rigid frontiers for a friendship between a man and a woman? Frontiers which precluded a hundred and one little attentions, a devotion ever wakeful, ever on the alert, the bringing of baskets of fruit and bouquets of flowers from the farm, the creeping of fervour into the voice, the illumination of the eyes when smiling? He sensed, despite that official and categorical ban she had proclaimed, that she herself was finding a new pleasure in

their friendship, and that though she protested sometimes against his excessive attentions, she was not averse to accepting them. . . . If there was no hope for him at all, would she have agreed to their remaining even friends? Twice, when he had dared give her hand a little extra pressure on leaving, she had returned it. He nourished his heart on this new sweetness in his life. Sometimes he even hugged the prospect of a permanently hopeless love as something exquisitely fine and precious.

The following morning he went to the farm. As his car swung into the open space between the rest-house and the office, he saw a group of men squatting round the office door. Ibrahim, hearing the car, came out to meet him.

Going into the office, Mahmoud said to the men, "Peace be on you."

"And on you be peace," they answered sullenly.

"What's the matter with these men?" he asked Ibrahim.

"Nothing," said Ibrahim.

"How nothing?" said one of the men, their spokesman. "Why don't you tell him? We want him to know."

"What is it?" said Mahmoud. "What's the matter?"

"What do you want me to tell him?" shouted Ibrahim, turning round on the men. "That you are a pack of silly old women, idiots ready to believe any old wife's tale? Enough of this nonsense now. Begone with you! Your work is waiting."

"And our children are dying. . . . We shan't go to our work and leave our children to die. Two of them have died already, and there is sickness in all the other huts. . . . We don't go back to those huts. There's a curse on them. Our women won't sleep in them another night."

"What's all this about?" asked Mahmoud, turning from the spokesman to Ibrahim and from Ibrahim to the spokesman.

"It's the huts you have built us," said the spokesman, ". . . you and your friend the son of Shendi. They're not our kind of dwelling, and we don't like living in them. The huts we had before were better for us. Our women were happy in them, and our children healthy."

"And what's the matter with your children now?"

"The daughter of that man there died before they had been in their hut a week; and my little boy the day we moved in. Three other children are now sick."

"God is great!" shouted Ibrahim. "Aren't you Moslems? Don't you believe that nothing happens but what is written? Didn't you



have sickness and death before? What's it got to do with where you live. . . . Aren't you living in palaces now compared to the muck holes you had before?"

"Our women believe there's jinn in the huts. . . . Please find us somewhere else to live, or give us palm-mats and poles and we'll make ourselves tents that will keep us sheltered till the next rains come."

"And what do you want me to do with the huts?" asked Ibrahim. Mahmoud listened, too shattered to speak.

"You can store cotton in them," said the spokesman helpfully.

"All right, all right. . . . Now, go to your work. I will think it over with Mahmoud Effendi, and then we will talk about it again."

The men walked away, chattering and spitting, and Ibrahim and Mahmoud went into the office.

"Didn't I tell you?" said Ibrahim. "These are animals, not the progeny of Adam. . . . Curses and jinns descend on their brutish heads! Pamper them again. Build them huts! . . . Store cotton in them!"

"Is it serious, do you think, or will they settle down?"

"They were talking of leaving the farm yesterday. I hope to God they don't, with the picking in full swing."

Mahmoud walked into the village and stood looking at the new row of huts. Six of them had been built, making a clean, tidy suburb in the village, well-aired, well-lit, attractive to look at with their domed roofs and windows patterned like lace to keep the glare out. The belongings of two households stood piled outside, as though ready to be moved away. . . . Some distance behind, the old hovels still clustered, crooked, cracked, the stinking darkness in them sealing the low doorways.

After a moment he turned and walked away. . . . Nothing mattered: it was Friday, and in the evening he would be seeing Jean.

"I've been thinking of you all today," she said when he arrived. "I was having dinner at the principal's last night, and he told me about the lectures. How disappointed you must be!" Her eyes caressed him with an unutterable sympathy.

"Yes," he said. "I am."

"And disgusted with this stupid, bigoted opposition! I was furious myself when I heard."

"And you haven't heard everything." He told her about his father and the election, about the scene in Osman's office. "How could I do what he asked? . . . You don't think it priggish or pharisaical of me to refuse him, do you?"

"No, I don't, if that's how you feel about it. Will it really affect your father's prospects?"

"He and Osman seem to think it will; and, you know, it will be a terrible blow to him if he's not elected."

"What a mean attack!"

"Osman thinks my own career will suffer if I come to be known as an unbeliever."

"Nonsense. I can't believe that. All this will blow over."

"Anyhow, I shouldn't care much if it didn't, now that I've had to give up the philosophy. I'm not in love with the economics."

"Don't get so depressed. I'm sure you'll be able to start the philosophy again . . . and the college isn't your only interest. You've got the farm."

He smiled. "All my ships are sinking," he said, and told her about the huts.

"But they won't really leave?" she said.

"Even if they don't, it doesn't exactly help with the others. . . . We wanted to start on a new row next month. My father may now decide against it, and what can I say to him when the people are so unhelpful?"

She said, smiling, "The reformer's path has never been an easy one. You mustn't feel downhearted at one or two reverses. . . . I'm sure you'll win through."

Sitting close to her while they had their lesson, feeling her sympathy, their eyes meeting every few seconds, his spirits revived, and he talked and jested with the nervous gaiety he always felt in her company. It was a cool evening and they were having the lesson in her sitting-room, with the door leading on to the verandah shut. In the heavily shaded light of the standard lamp behind the table a quiet, reassuring privacy filled the room. Her face glowed softly in the light as she wrote her last few sentences, and he watched it with a pain rapidly becoming unbearable. His gaiety dried up, and though they chatted for a few moments when the lesson was over she noticed the difference in his manner, and felt a tension growing in her too as their sentences became shorter and the silences lengthened. She moved uneasily in her chair, and the next moment her hand was in his and he was kissing it passionately.

"No, no . . . please!" she said, drawing it away. Then she stood up. He stood up too and they faced each other in silence. She could not speak. She could not move, as she wanted to. And again it happened. His arms were round her and he was kissing her, on

her forehead, on her cheeks, on her lips, her whole body pressed to his.

It only lasted a moment, but it had happened—and she had known it was going to happen, felt its inevitability, been unable to prevent it. She had not pushed him away, and her limpness remained for a moment even after they parted and while they stared at each other in mute recognition of catastrophe. Then feebly, through the tumult of her feelings, her power of speech came back.

"You must never come here again," she said. "Good-bye."

"You love me!" he said, still staring at her. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Please leave me."

"Only tell me that you don't love me and I'll go and never let you see me again." He held her eyes desperately so that she had to go on looking into his. She looked with pain and sadness and fear. A terrible stiffness had come into her body after the limpness.

"I've asked you to go," she said without expression.

"I will go in a moment, but let me say something first."

"What is it?"

"Is it impossible for you to think of marrying me in any circumstances? Please tell me the truth."

"I can't marry you, Mahmoud. I can't think of marrying you. . . . Yes, it is impossible . . . quite impossible."

"In *any* circumstances? . . . I will divorce my wife tomorrow. She doesn't really care for me. She'd be equally happy married to anyone else."

"No, no! You mustn't think of doing that. Don't go on. . . ."

"Why? You know she was imposed on me. Why should she stand between us? . . . If you love me, if you could bring yourself to marry me—I mean, if that's the only obstacle. . . . Is it?"

"I don't know."

"But you do love me, a little, don't you?"

"You're very dear to me, Mahmoud; but I don't know if I love you. I can't know, when you are married and have a child and a whole life which makes it out of the question for me to think of marrying you."

"If it's the thought of living here that prevents you, I'll leave the country. . . . I'll go anywhere in the world with you. I love you, Jean; I only live in the hours I am with you. My life will be a crippled life without you. . . . Tell me now to go away and not see you again."

There was a long silence, then she said:

"You mustn't see me again. Please stay away from me. For your own sake and for my sake, please don't come again."

In the doorway, as he was going out, he turned to face her again. "Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye."

A bitter twist came into his face, a pain that narrowed his eyes, as he said:

"I suppose it is too much to expect you to tell me the brutal truth."

"What do you mean?" she said, cut by his look before he spoke.

"That you don't want to marry a black man and have half-caste children. Why should you?"

"You shouldn't have said that!" Her lip trembled, and he saw the lingering tremor on it.

"Why? . . . Because it's too ugly a fact to look in the face? I was a fool not to look it in the face before, not to see that it had not become a normal thing just because Betty Corfield had married Amin . . . not to admit to myself that I had no right to ask you to accept all the embarrassments and inconveniences that go with it. It isn't right, is it, that a man should inflict all that on the woman he loves? He should refuse to do it, even if she asked him, not try to persuade her, as I have done. . . . Please forgive me."

The bitterness with which he had begun to speak slumped out of him as soon as he felt the unkind taunt in his mention of Betty, and by the time he ended his words held neither bitterness nor irony, but a sad, humble recognition of truth. She was looking at him so miserably, her pain staring mutely through the liquid rim of her eyes, that he hated himself for having hurt her so much. When he said, "Please forgive me," he meant it in tender contrition, and there was no cunning in it, no theatrical appeal to her pity.

"I will go now," he said. "Good night."

Her tears flowed. She was standing absolutely motionless, looking at him. Nothing in her body moved, nothing in her face, except her trembling lips and the tears on her cheeks.

"Don't cry," he said, coming forward and putting his hand on her shoulder. "I've been very foolish and very selfish. You've been kind to me, and I have hurt you. Please forget everything I have said this evening."

"You haven't hurt me," she said. "It's my fault; it's been my fault all along."

He took her hand, which was cold and limp, and raised it to his lips. She let him do so. He kissed it gently, then turned and walked out.

He did not go to see her again. Monday came, the day for the next Arabic lesson; but he had accepted, in his heart, the fact that

there were to be no more lessons, that they could not now remain mere friends. She did not want him to see her again, nor could he face seeing her. All his sensitiveness about his black skin in relation to her had come back. He was certain now that she could never bring herself to marry him, and a sweet-bitter chivalry growing out of his tormented love fortified him with the conviction that for her it was better so.

It was two weeks later that he heard at the college one day that she was leaving the country. Apparently her mother was ill and needed her, so that she had had to resign at very short notice, and was leaving within a week. So one of the British tutors told him, adding, "Pity all the Arabic lessons you gave her will be wasted now. She was getting on very well with it, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was," said Mahmoud. "It is a shame."

He did not know whether to believe this mother-illness story or not. It could, of course, be true. But it also could be that she had another reason for leaving; and in spite of his despair before this finality, before the prospect of a future in which she just would not be there, at a few hundred yards from his house, where he might occasionally see her by chance, the thought that her leaving had something to do with him held, even in its terrible negativeness, a cause for pride, for a strange excitement which he cherished in the midst of his despair.

But there was another excitement that tormented him with the pressure of its cruel alternatives: would she go without seeing him again? Should he go to say good-bye, or was it less unbearable to them both that he should not? He waited to see if she would ring him up or send a note, but the days slipped by and nothing came from her. He gave his lectures at the college in the morning, went to the farm in the afternoon, played a little with his daughter in the evening. Fortunately, his father was away all that week in another town. If he had been there, he would have wanted to invite her to a farewell dinner, as others in the town were doing, and anyhow would have been very surprised at her not coming to say good-bye to them . . . if she didn't come.

Four days before she was due to leave, he received the following note from the principal:

Miss Bannerman is dining with me on Wednesday, 14th, with a few friends from the college. I shall be very glad if you can join us, and I am sure she will be glad to see you on such an occasion in view of her many connections with your family. I do hope you can come.

He kept the note for two hours before replying :

DEAR PRINCIPAL,

Thank you so much for your very kind invitation. I should have loved to come, but I'm afraid I shan't be in town that night. I'm going to the farm in the afternoon, and unfortunately have to stay there till the next day.

The one thing he certainly could not face was to see her in public.

The last day came and she had neither rung up nor sent a note. It could be that she did not want to see him again, or it could be that she thought he would not want to see her. Several times he stood by the telephone, but a hideous nervousness paralysed him and he could not lift the receiver. He thought he would write to her himself, but when he sat down at the desk he did not know what to say, how much feeling to express, what sort of key to write in. He gave it up.

Then, in the afternoon, when he got into his car to go to the farm, he panicked into decision. Knowing that this was the last chance, that when he came back the next morning her train would have left, he swung the car round and drove to the school—not so much obeying a desire, as fleeing from the after-anguish of letting her go without saying good-bye to her.

He drew up, remembering the previous time he had come to say good-bye before she went on leave—when she was only going away for three months, when beyond that short absence months of Arabic lessons lay ahead for him to look forward to, when he was preparing his surprise appearance at the suburb station with the mangoes and flowers and planning his telegram to his friend the police officer.

"Miss Bannerman is not in," said the servant. "She's gone out to tea."

And she was going out to dinner. But in between tea and dinner she would be at home for some time; she would come back to change, and if he waited he would see her alone then. But he couldn't wait there all that time. It might be another hour or more before she came. He would go to the town and call at some of the shops. He had many friends among the shopkeepers—Syrians, Greeks, Armenians. One often passed the time of day by dropping in to chat to them for a few moments—to old Bagramian with his rolls of jolly fat and the bottle of whisky he kept in his little office at the back of the shop, and which before you had sat down came

out slowly, slyly, from the bottom drawer of the desk, appearing above the edge simultaneously with the fat grin on Bagramian's face, followed by his chuckle of protesting innocence. Yes, he could do with a drink. It was just what he wanted.

"Welcome, Professor," said Bagramian, beaming with bulky sweaty geniality. "What is the matter? You haven't been near us for a long time. . . . Sit down, sit down." He looked the picture of contentment and benignity, relaxed in tropical comfort under his spinning fan. Mahmoud envied him, wondering if that comfortable, capacious bosom could ever harbour anguish.

"I've been busy at the college and the farm."

"Ah, you're not a farmer. You're a professor. Leave the farm to your father." Then he clapped his podgy, hairy hands, and when the little boy appeared from behind the glass door, said, "Two sodas," and his hand went down to the bottom drawer.

Mahmoud had two drinks of the heavy calibre that Bagramian gave you, and left. It was now dark and though too early to expect her back from her tea he returned to the vicinity of the school and parked round a corner from where he could see her when she arrived, without his vigil being noticed by anyone. He didn't want to be seen by anyone who might be bringing her home in his car.

As he waited his impatience began to turn into anger. . . . Out to tea and out to dinner. Out to dinner every day of her last week, having a gay social time, not giving a damn for him. Of course she wasn't leaving on account of him. What a silly, vain thought that had been! It must be true about her mother, and she was having a grand time before she left, enjoying every moment of it. And he was waiting there, in the dark, like an abject dog. . . . He wouldn't wait more than just one more minute. . . . He wouldn't wait at all, since she hadn't chosen to say good-bye to him. He turned the switch-key and was about to press the self-starter when he heard the sound of a car and a second later saw it stopping at her gate.

She got out, said good-bye to her escort and walked in. The gate was open and in the light of the little lamp above it he watched her walking up the short drive to the verandah. It was as though a rope that bound him was tied to her feet and tugged at him with every step she took. He got out and followed her in. By the time he reached the verandah she had entered the sitting-room, but hearing footsteps she turned round in the doorway and saw him. For a moment they only looked at each other, then he said:

"I've only come to say good-bye. May I come in?"

"Of course." There was a furtive warmth behind the tautness in her voice.

He followed her into the room.

"Sit down," she said.

He sat, saying, "I know you're going out to dinner, and I shall only stay a moment. I didn't come before because I didn't know whether you wanted me to. . . . But I had to come tonight."

"I'm glad you came," she said.

"I'm very sorry to hear about your mother," he said.

"Thank you."

They talked on a thin brittle surface for a few moments, then he said:

"Well, I must be going. You'll be wanting to change for your dinner . . . and I've got to go to the farm."

They both stood up in a sudden, quivering silence, and she could see the motion of his throat in the strain of swallowing. For a second her eyes fluttered up and down his face, as though she were trapped and desperately searching for a way of escape; then with a strange, steady intensity she looked him straight in the eyes, almost with exultation, and said:

"There's one thing I want to tell you before you go . . . before I go."

"What?"

"If I had wanted to marry, I should have been happy and proud to marry you. . . . But I don't want to marry; I'm not going to marry." She put a sort of defiant emphasis on 'proud' as though it was addressed not only to him, and her eyes without blinking, gazing hard at him, filled slowly with tears.

"Thank you," he said. "I shall be happy and proud all my life to have heard you say this. . . . I wish you every happiness, Jean."

"And now, let's part on a smile," she said, blinking the tears out of her eyes. "Good-bye, Mahmoud, and every bit of good luck be yours."

She held out her hand and he shook it, smiling bravely back.

## CHAPTER XIV

It was only some two months later that his misery began to lift. He was in the car on his way to the farm one day when he felt its tyranny relax completely for the first time. He became, suddenly it seemed to him, aware of being free again. A sense of lightness



filled his heart, the power to enjoy life came back as in a revelation. The river looked beautiful. He thought with zest of the jobs awaiting him at the farm. His warmth for Ibrahim and Yusuf flowed again.

The whole of his life seemed once more acceptable. Several gratifications, which had reached him only dully before, now made a new impact of pleasure—despite the attack on his freethinking, his father had been elected and was now preparing his first oration for the Assembly; the trouble over the huts had died down when the sick children recovered and the wife of one of the tenants had given birth to twin boys in splendid health; and though the philosophy lectures, as formal fixtures, had been stopped, several of his pupils came to him privately for discussion or, as he described it, 'philosophy had gone underground'.

At home, his daughter was beginning to talk and toddle. When she stood up the fat on her legs above the knees made her look more than ever like a miniature Michelin advertisement. Her frizzy hair stood up like a comic brush, looking indescribably sweet when her round black eyes above the half-balloon cheeks took on a solemn expression, and she could smile with a most sophisticated and endearing coyness. Mahmoud spent more and more of his time playing with her and planning the details of her future upbringing. He bought her dozens of rattles and soft woolly animals. He had ordered from England one or two books on mothercraft, and tried to get Badriya to follow the instructions in them. Sometimes she did, but even when he couldn't persuade her, or when she lapsed into local practices behind his back after humouring him with a pretence of conformity, he did not worry much, seeing that the child was very healthy and progressing wonderfully well.

Badriya herself seemed to him less unacceptable now. Returning from his dream of Jean Bannerman, he felt sorry for his wife, guilty to have thought of divorcing her. And he felt, in the reality to which he awoke, that he inevitably belonged to her. She was of his people, one of the fixtures of his background against which it was idle to rebel, and she was Leila's mother.

In a way he was glad that he was no longer in love with her. He was glad to be again free from all emotional bondage, as he had been two years before—before his father had thrown Badriya in his way and he had fallen in love with her. Those two years he had not been himself, he had been the slave of his feelings, first with Badriya, and then with Jean—the slave of sex appearing to him in

different forms. How wonderful to be free from it again . . . able to concentrate on his work, on the things he wanted to do.

In a few months Jean became a memory which he could recall without agitation. He could wonder with a mild interest what she was doing. The thought that in all probability he would never see her again did not worry him. He lost the nail-file again and did not bother to look for it. . . . All that had been a dream.

He saw a good deal of Amin and Betty during this time. They seemed to have got over the teething troubles of their abnormal situation very well. Their unique life in the rural bungalow standing by itself away from both the British and the native environments was well established, and they had many friends—native, British and cosmopolitan. Sir William Carter went to tea or tennis at their place from time to time. Betty had learned Arabic well enough to be able to talk to the native women, and she visited quite a number of them—all the wives of their friends. Without ever being able to belong to their world, she liked going to see them and hearing them talk about their lives and their men. They had their fun and their jokes, and some of them were very vivacious. They all wanted to know how to limit their families, some of them desperate to escape from the drudgery of endless childbearing. They asked Betty about the modern contraceptives of which they had vaguely heard, and she informed and instructed them. They grouped round her, giggling and listening.

"How's the harem reform movement progressing?" Mahmoud would ask her whenever they met, and she would tell him about her latest achievements.

"No more children for the judge!" she would say. "That's settled!" or, "Osman and his wife can now make love with impunity; I've seen to that."

Amin was painting to his heart's content, and had already given one exhibition at the River Palace Hotel, at the height of the tourist season, which proved both an artistic and a financial success. He was becoming more and more French in manner and speech. He received several art publications from Paris regularly, as well as *L'Humanité* and *Le Canard Enchaîné*. His fringe of beard was thickening into distinction, and when the weather was cool the beret scarcely ever left his head. But the most significant thing that had happened to him was his transfer to the customs department, since which event he had, to his great delight, become known to Mahmoud, the college tutors and the Esperanto couple, as

'the Douanier'. "*Tu vois,*" he had said to Betty, "*c'est mon destin!*"

Often at their house Mahmoud met Aisha, Amin's sister, now in the second year of the secondary school.

"This," Mahmoud would say, "is your greatest achievement."

And Betty would say, "Yes. More positive than birth-control; you see the results!"

And what results! Aisha was reading Jane Austen and Dickens, riding a bicycle and playing tennis. The books she could read at home, but the bicycle and the tennis were still a secret from Sheikh Ayyoub, indulged in only at the bungalow when she was staying with Amin and Betty. The judge was in the secret and approved with huge chuckles. His daughters too were beginning to visit the bungalow and join in these activities. Betty had persuaded him to send them all to the secondary school when the time came.

Mahmoud could see that without belonging to either community Amin and Betty had made a happy life for themselves on their little island. But he was different from Amin. He liked the large, friendly gatherings at his father's house in the evenings: the way anybody could drop in and feel at home, the heaps of slippers and canes on the terrace, the old men rising to pray after supper. Amin had abstracted himself from that kind of warmth.

## CHAPTER XV

It was about a year after Jean Bannerman's departure that Mahmoud accompanied the principal of the college on a mission to Uganda for a few weeks. They went to exchange views with the Uganda education people on certain matters of common interest.

At one of the schools they visited he saw a large collection of animals carved in mahogany—elephants, lions, giraffes and all the rest of the tropical family. They were exquisitely made, and he stood for a moment fingering them.

"You like them?" asked the headmaster.

"Yes, very much. Are they made locally?"

"Yes. There is a man in the market-place who makes them."

"Do you think he could make me a set in time for me to take away? I'd like to take one for my little daughter." He could just

see her on her little rug spreading them out with great care, then with a mighty sweep of her hand scattering them about.

"You may find a set ready to take away. He often has one or two available."

When a few days later he boarded the 'plane for the return journey the set of animals for Leila was packed in his luggage, with cotton-wool round the elephant's tusks and the giraffe's neck to protect their slender fragility, though, he thought smiling, they probably wouldn't survive for long in her hands. He could imagine her holding the elephant and methodically banging the points of the tusks on the floor until they splintered. He had not had time to think of her much during these few weeks, but the thought of seeing her again now warmed him with happy anticipations. Her image wobbling on her fat legs, or sitting solidly on her posterior, her legs spread out in a wide V, was in his mind most of the way on the 'plane.

Badriya met him on the verandah when he arrived, but he saw no sign of Leila.

"Where is Leila?" he asked.

"She's in bed," she answered casually.

"What's the matter with her? Is she ill?"

"No," she said. "She's been circumcised."

"Circumcised! Who said she was to be circumcised? Didn't you know I didn't want her to be circumcised?"

"And why? What's the harm in it?" she said, partly ignoring his expressed opposition, partly challenging it. She was frightened by the vehemence of his anger, by the look of hate that flashed out of his face.

"Never mind about that," he shouted. "You knew I didn't want it done to her! You knew!"

She knew, but she had never imagined he would be so angry about it. Some of the younger educated fathers were beginning to object to it, but the women still had their way; and her friends had told her that the best thing was to have it done without his knowing, while he was away. She had not expected him to come back from his trip so soon, had hoped that everything would be over and Leila up again before he came back.

"And what if I knew?" she retorted. "You don't want anything done that everybody else does. You want to be an Englishman, an English husband and an English father. . . . You don't even believe in God and the Prophet!"

He stared at her, struck dumb by her last sentence, and she continued:

"Do you know anybody here who doesn't have his girl circumcised? It isn't clean not to be circumcised, it isn't chaste. . . . No man would marry your daughter if she wasn't circumcised."

A murderous rage choked him. This female circumcision was a horrid practice, a barbarous old custom, pre-Islamic, which inflicted mutilation on the girl and caused her pain in later life, at puberty, every month during menstruation and with every childbirth. He had been determined that his daughter should not be subjected to it, and the thought that it had been done behind his back, when he was not there to save the poor child from it, filled him with a black fury.

"When was this done?" he shouted.

"Three days ago . . . on Monday. Our neighbour's daughter was being circumcised. They told me the midwife was coming to do it, so I had Leila done at the same time."

He brushed past her, going straight to the bedroom. Leila was lying in her cot, moaning, her face pinched with pain and discomfort. She could not even smile when she saw him. Her head turned feebly from side to side and her shoulders gave a wriggle every now and then.

"Water," she said. "I want water."

Badriya lifted a glass of water from the table, but Mahmoud took it from her and went with it to the cot. He was speechless with the horror of this brutal, unnecessary torture. It was curiously a little like what he had felt when the news of his marriage reached him. Only that had been a cruel injury of the spirit done to him, and this was a cruel injury inflicted on his daughter's body. Beastly, bloody customs hitting you in the back! Bloody, ignorant, primitive wife!

He lifted her head from the pillow to give her the water, and she drank a few sips, moaning, complaining inarticulately; then when her head was back on the pillow, she gave him a scowling look and muttered: "Wa-wa, wa-wa"; which in her baby vocabulary meant 'pain'.

He had noticed when holding up her head that her neck felt hot. He passed his hand on her forehead and cheeks, then felt her hand.

"The child is sick," he said. "She's got fever." He took her temperature and found it was 103.

"Is it?" said Badriya. "Circumcision sometimes brings fever. It's nothing."

It also brought sometimes, from the dirty instruments of the butcher females who performed it, septicæmia and death.

They took Leila to the hospital and she died two days later. The set of animals remained unpacked.

They took her out to the bleak cemetery on the fringe of the desert and buried her. It was a day of appalling heat, and the melancholy gusts which always seemed to blow there hissed along among the graves, raising blinding wreaths of dust in the mourners' faces. For miles around there was nothing but dust, not a splash of green, not a peep of life. It was a dead earth for the dead. The tiny body, swathed in calico and covered with a shroud, was carried to the cemetery on a palm-matted bed and laid in the grave unboxed so that, in Moslem austerity, it should lie direct on the earth to which it was returning.

Then followed the three days of mourning, the spreading of carpets all over the house, the purchasing of sacks of sugar and coffee beans, the borrowing of cups and glasses and trays. Sheikh Ahmed and Mahmoud, unshaven and wearing only long white shirts, sat cross-legged on the floor, standing up whenever a new visitor arrived and, with raised hands, exchanging with him the *Fatiha*—opening verse of the Koran.

"*Fatiha!*" the visitor would announce, stopping on the doorstep and raising his hands.

"*Fatiha!*" they would answer, and the quiet recitation would follow, before the visitor dropped into some vacant place on the floor, sitting like them cross-legged for his few moments of condolence.

"You may go now. May God reward your endeavour," Sheikh Ahmed or Mahmoud would say to him when he had been there five or ten minutes. Then he would rise and go, and other visitors would come in.

"*Fatiha!*"

"*Fatiha!*"

Mahmoud got up and sat down, sat down and got up, numbed by the repetition of the exercise and the subdued recitation. For once he was glad of his country's domestic customs which kept the husband and wife largely apart in the first days of bereavement. Badriya was wailing her grief in the harem with the other women, and the only pity he felt for her in her pain was a bitter, distant pity. The alienation he felt and had felt from the moment he went into the room and saw the suffering child was so complete that no sense of common anguish had drawn him to her during his daughter's last hours or when she died.

Even when, on the third day, sensing that there was something more than grief in his terrible silence, and wanting to exculpate

herself, she wailed at him, "This was her kismet, Mahmoud: so it was written for her," he only nodded and said, "Yes . . . yes." He could neither share his grief with her, nor shout back, "No! It was you that killed her!" Though it added to his bitterness that she had a comfort which was not his because she really believed that it was the will of God.

Mingled with his grief, a startling new hope began to illuminate the edge of his consciousness. It did so at first in flashes, then with a steady, unbearable brightness that filled his whole mind.

One day about two months later he said to his father:

"I want to divorce Badriya." They were at the farm and had just come back to the rest-house from the fields.

Sheikh Ahmed stared at him for a moment, then repeated:

"You want to divorce her?"

"Yes."

"Don't you love her?"

"No."

"What's that you're saying? What's made you think of divorcing her now?"

"I don't want to have any more children by her."

"And will you divorce her now, a few weeks after her daughter's death? Have you no kindness in your heart?"

"It's kinder for her that we should part now. She knows I've had no love for her since Leila died."

Sheikh Ahmed was silent for a moment. He knew about Mahmoud's bitterness over the circumcision. At last he said:

"If you want to marry again, why don't you go ahead and marry? Why should you divorce her? You can have two wives; and that would give less offence to your uncle's family."

"I don't want to have two wives. I don't want to be married at all. I want to be free, free!" he shouted. "I've sacrificed three years of my life to your convenience and the self-respect of my uncle's family. Isn't that enough for you? . . . You arranged the first chapter of my life, and I submitted. But it's now over, and I want to arrange the second. I'm divorcing Badriya. She will be free to marry again. She is young and beautiful, and there are many who would be very glad to marry her, and with whom she would be happier than she has been with me. . . . She knows I want to divorce her. Will you please tell my uncle's wife?"

"All right, all right," said Sheikh Ahmed, cowed by Mahmoud's outburst. "Don't shout. The whole farm is hearing you. We'll talk about it later."

"There's nothing more to talk about. . . . Not this time."

He left for England as soon as the college broke up for the summer. It was three years since he had gone down from Oxford; and coming back in his new freedom he recaptured something of the flavour of the past—the distant thrill of his first arrival in England; the spray and mist of the Channel crossing, the first cup of tea at Dover, the rolling green of Kent, the red cavalcade of the London buses outside Victoria Station. Everything that had happened since that day when he had stood on the platform at that same station awaiting his father's arrival with Badriya was now behind him. He walked briskly, enjoying the feel of the cool English air on his face. Even the smoke in it seemed friendly.

He took a taxi to Paddington and went straight to Oxford. There was nothing to keep him in London. Jean's home was not in London. She lived in Shrewsbury. He would go to Oxford and write to her from there. He would just tell her that he was in England, and how nice it would be to see her again. He would say he could go up to Shrewsbury any day, and wait to see what she said. He would not mention his daughter's death or his divorce until they met. When he told her, she would know at once what he had come to England for . . . and he would know what he had come to find out.

It was still daylight when he got to Oxford. The fragments of the past rushed back—the stations, Carfax, the High, a glimpse of Tom Tower on the right; the same, but different—a palimpsest of memory on the present moment.

He took a room at the Mitre, wrote and posted his letter to Jean, then walked down the High to his old college. There were no gowns in the street, for the summer vacation had started. But Harris was in the lodge, limping slightly and just about to retire, waiting to underline with his red ink the college successes in the examination lists for the last time. They exchanged warm greetings, then Mahmoud asked him about Wentworth. . . . Yes, he was in residence, hadn't gone away yet . . . and Jim Powell was there. He had been elected to a fellowship the term before.

"Good Lord!" said Pythagoras when Mahmoud walked into his room. "The return of the native! . . . Have the blacks deposed you? What did you do to them?"

"I tried to teach them philosophy," said Mahmoud, grinning, delighted. This was the authentic past—Pythagoras, Oxford!

He called on Wentworth next, crossing the quad with his long, springy step, feeling it lighter, more springy than it had been for years, stopping for a moment to say something to a scout he recognised.



After they had talked for some time about himself, Wentworth said :

"And how's your father?" The inkstand with the ivory elephants and the 'W' trunks was there in its place of honour on the desk.

"In great form," said Mahmoud. Then he added, smiling, "He quoted Spinoza in his first speech in the Assembly."

"Splendid! Splendid!" said Wentworth.

After an hour and a half at his college he went back to his room at the Mitre, exhilarated, all his faculties humming with a pleasant, warming excitement.

The next morning, as he was making his way to the Union after breakfast, gazing on the ground as usual, and just after he had turned into the Cornmarket, a voice at his elbow said :

"Mahmoud!"

He looked up and saw Jean.

"How nice to see you," she said. "What are you doing here? When did you come?"

"I arrived yesterday. . . ." For a moment he did not know what to say next, so flustered was he by this unrehearsed meeting.

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. . . . I wrote to you yesterday, to your Shrewsbury address. . . . I'd no idea you'd be here."

"I've come to attend a teachers' conference. . . . I'm teaching at a school in Shrewsbury now. I only came a few days ago. . . . What a very nice surprise! . . . And what have you come for? Just a holiday?"

"Yes . . . and to see old friends." Their eyes met as he said this, and to break the tension she felt immediately she laughed, saying, "How nice of you."

"Is the conference sitting this morning, or have you time for a cup of coffee?"

"We're meeting at half-past ten. . . ."

"It's only a quarter to now. . . . Would you like to?"

They went to the Cadena, and as they were sitting down she said :

"And how's everybody at home . . . how's Leila?"

He told her. He told her how she had died, and when he finished telling her that he said after a short pause :

"Badriya and I have parted. I have divorced her."

As he had guessed she would, she knew instantly, and while she was still expressing her sympathy, why he had come to England, why he had written to her the moment he arrived. She felt the vacuum of his present position sucking at her.

When she rose to go he said :

"How much longer are you staying here?"

"Till the end of the week."

"When am I going to see you again? Can we meet in the afternoon or evening?"

"I'm afraid I'm booked for both tea and dinner." She sounded almost distressed; she wasn't making excuses.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yēs; tomorrow is all right. I shall be free in the afternoon."

"Let's go on the river. Would you like to? Or for a walk in Port Meadow and then have tea."

"That would be lovely."

Often she had asked herself that question—pressingly, in pain, at the crisis which led to her resignation; in whimsical speculation at odd moments in the following months. Would she have married him if he had been free—not if he freed himself in order to marry her, leaving his wife and child to do so, but if she had met him in altogether different circumstances? She did not know. She could never quite imagine how far her feelings would have gone in an entirely different situation; or perhaps she did not want to, was afraid to think of her feelings unopposed by the barrier of his family background and her connection with it. Perhaps if she imagined that barrier removed, she would have to admit to herself that in spite of her great fondness for him, in spite of all her sympathy and admiration, there were other barriers which it was not in her power to surmount. When in his bitterness he had taunted her and then humbled himself with the fact of his colour, she had stood speechless, almost in horror at the brutality of the thought and the pain it was causing him. She had told him she was not the marrying type, and perhaps that was true. Perhaps she did not care sufficiently for men in that way, not as much as she prized her independence and the feminine privacy of her life. And it wasn't only from kindness she had told him that if she had wanted to marry she would have been happy and proud to marry him. She knew that if she could have married him she would have been happy with him and proud of him, but most of all she had desperately wanted to feel, and to make him feel, that her refusal had nothing to do with his skin.

• All that morning at the conference she was too agitated to be able to pay any attention to the proceedings. The impact of his reappearance, the challenge to her feelings in this new situation,

taking her unawares, plunged her into deeper heart-searchings than she had permitted herself in the past. The barrier she had focused her attention on was gone now; and he was lonely, bereaved and needing her more than ever. He had come after her all that way. He had followed her a year and a half after she left. No man had ever felt like that for her before. Perhaps no man ever would again. And her heart had throbbed with joy when she saw him; she had felt so happy walking with him to the Cadena, talking to him again, glancing at the tall, stooping figure, seeing the kindness and humour in his eyes, sensing his pleasure in being with her. . . . Betty had married Amin. There seemed nothing unnatural in it. One accepted them now as a fact. Why should she not do the same? What did the colour of the skin matter? She tried to remember how she had felt that time he kissed her. Was it because of that she couldn't marry him? Or because of the social complications, children. . . . No, no, it wasn't really because of his being black at all. It couldn't be. It was just that she wasn't the marrying type. Perhaps she was deficient in sex. . . . She tried to imagine him as a white man, the same in every way, but white. Then she felt ashamed of herself, and her mind swerved away in a new direction: would it really be a good thing for him that she should marry him? He was not like Amin. He belonged to his people, and she could not belong to them. There would be so many difficulties in the way, awkwardnesses for him. If it had come off with Betty and Amin, that didn't mean it would always come off. And the Shendis hadn't had any children yet. . . .

The next afternoon he met her outside Lady Margaret Hall as she was coming out of the conference.

"Settled the fate of the new generation?" he asked. It was like the early days of their friendship.

She looked at him quickly, unsure whether there was any under-meaning in his flippancy.

"I'm afraid I'm not any good at settling fates," she said with a smile. Coming out of the conference, in the midst of batches of other teachers, she looked to him very much the schoolmistress, very virginal and unassailable.

"How's your mother now?" he asked, as they walked down St Giles's.

"She's very well, thank you."

"Then you're not staying in Shrewsbury because you have to look after her?"

"No, not exactly," she said, sensing the drift of his question.

They were silent after this for some time, then she began to ask

him questions about old friends—the Shendis, the principal and tutors of the college, Sir William, keeping the conversation flowing in impersonal directions. They reached the meadow, walked for some time along the river, then sat down on a bench. Their talk about others seemed to be drying up. Noticeable silences crept in and the remarks that ended them became strained. Her heart was beating painfully. She was afraid that something was going to happen, that he was suddenly going to take her hand or say something that she wouldn't know how to answer. She had sat up half the night trying to find the answer, and she hadn't found it. Something in her ached to go out in answer to his love and loneliness. It heaved, then froze at the exit.

"Are you happy in your job?" he asked.

"Yes, I like it."

"Pity you don't need any Arabic for it . . . or have you forgotten it all?"

"No, not all."

"But most of it? One can forget a lot in a year and a half. You must regret all the hours you spent on it."

"No, I don't regret them," she said, looking at him. "I shall never regret them even if I forget all my Arabic." She had said this on an impulse, but was afraid the moment she had said it, feeling an imminence of crisis. She said, her voice going immediately into a lighter key:

"What's the name of that bugbear of your grammar we used to laugh so much about?"

"Sibawayh?"

"Sibawayh!" A happy laugh escaped from them both.

"Poor old Sibawayh," said Mahmoud; "I don't think anybody ever made of him such a household pet as we did. It must have been quite a new experience for him."

After a while she asked, "How long are you going to stay in England?"

"I don't know," he said. "A few weeks."

"Are you going to tour a bit, or stay in Oxford all the time?"

"I didn't come specially to stay in Oxford," he said. Then after a moment added, "And what are you doing after the conference?"

"I shall go back to Shrewsbury, and perhaps later to the seaside for a week."

They had tea at the Trout Inn, then walked back. After that she left him and he went to his hotel.

He had not been able to tell her in so many words what he had

come to England for. And the thought occurred to him that he might not be able to tell her at all. Having said to her once that a black man had no right to ask her to marry him, he had not come now to plead with her again in words. His sensitiveness would not let him do that. He had come to let her know that he was free. His coming, his presence, was the question she must answer. If she could marry him now, she must make him know it. He would know it. He would see it in her eyes before she went back to Shrewsbury. He had two more days in which to find it out.

She went back to the college and had dinner with the other teachers. She needn't have done that, and he had pressed her to have dinner with him; but she had said she couldn't. She had felt she couldn't after the walk and the tea. The tension had become too much for her, and she wanted to be alone again to think.

She went up to her room early and sat down on her bed. In her room somehow she could never imagine herself married, couldn't see a man in the room with her. Even in a few days this strange room, with only the few personal belongings she had brought with her, had become hers, private, intimate in a manner which she could not share. Perhaps she would have been different if Tony Russell had not been killed when she was eighteen. . . . She was reclining on the bed, and her white arm lay stretched along her hip. Her eyes came to rest on it, travelled down to her hand suddenly and saw it in Mahmoud's clasp, his black fingers round her wrist. She made an effort to leave it there, then started violently, pulling her hand up. Half an hour later she was sitting in the chair near the window reading the Shakespeare she had brought with her. She was reading *Othello*.

She dined with him the next day at the hotel. They talked about the conference and education, about the college in his country, about the pleasure of revisiting Oxford, about their university days. They were sitting, he suddenly remembered, in the very corner where he had sat with Amin and Jim Powell the evening they had brought him there to celebrate their discovery of his marriage.

At last he said to her:

"So you go back tomorrow."

"Yes." They looked at each other, unable to speak but knowing, both of them, that words were superfluous.

Then she said:

"And you, how much longer are you staying in Oxford?"

"I think I'll go to London in a day or two."

"And then?"

"I want to go to Italy. There's nothing to keep me in England."

Several times she looked at him with an urgent sadness in her eyes, with a look that seemed desperately trying to break into speech, and he waited. But she said nothing, and then she dropped her eyes and when she looked again it was to say something irrelevant.

"What time is your train leaving tomorrow?" he asked.

"Eleven twenty-two."

"I'll come with you to the station. . . . I'll pick you up in a taxi at eleven."

They sat silent in the taxi as it sped on its brief journey. It was five past eleven. In another fifteen minutes she would be gone; in another three or four minutes they would be at the station, and he had had his answer . . . or had he? Wasn't it obtuse, indelicate of him to expect her to speak? How could she be certain that he still wanted her to marry him? . . . God, what a fool he had been! He should have told her, he should tell her now, say something at once, something like, "You know what I came to England for, don't you?" or "I am free now, Jean; doesn't that make any difference?" No pleading, no persuading, just a question like that.

"It's been wonderful seeing you again," she said, "and by accident like that."

"Not entirely by accident," he said, but could not add anything.

Just before the taxi stopped, she said without looking at him and very quietly:

"Don't be hard on me, Mahmoud. . . . I was only born to be a schoolmistress."

In a daze he helped her out of the taxi and carried her bags into the station.

"Would you like something to read?" he asked as they passed the bookstall.

"Thank you. I've got several things in my bag."

He put her bags down, and they stood facing each other, waiting for the train. They abandoned the attempt to force irrelevancies out of their lips, to desecrate the moment with inauties. Mutely they gazed into each other's eyes with a long, final sadness too candid to hide itself.

Then she was gone, and he turned to go back himself.

The dream had fled again. . . . It had all been a dream—a

dream and a nightmare—everything that had happened in those three years. In the awakening of a strange return, heavy with sadness but to his surprise in sight of acceptance, he walked down from the station as though to a new beginning. . . . He was still at Oxford. He was going to his tutorial with Wentworth. His father's letter had not arrived. His life in his country was still waiting to be shaped.

THE END

